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**NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND THE INDIVIDUAL IN THE *ÍSLENDINGASÖGUR*: MOTIVATION,  
PROVOCATION AND CHARACTERISATION**

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THIS DISSERTATION IS SUBMITTED FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY.

‘Oh, I knew it!’ gasped Mrs Dashwood with a dramatic flourish. ‘I told John that we should reconsider – I expect *out there* we are burnt in effigy, reviled for our actions, damned for all time?’

‘Not at all,’ I said, attempting to console her. ‘Narratively speaking, without your actions there wouldn’t be much of a story.’

...

‘We call it Minor Character Syndrome,’ explained Miss Havisham after I re-joined her. ‘Quite common when an essentially minor character has a large consequential part.’

— Jasper Fforde, *Lost in a Good Book*.

SUMMARY  
NARRATIVE STRUCTURE AND THE INDIVIDUAL IN THE *Íslendingasögur*: MOTIVATION, PROVOCATION AND  
CHARACTERISATION

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This thesis takes a fresh, character-based approach to the *Íslendingasögur*. It is inspired by a narratological study that unites the functional and structural role of characters with their human, individualistic portrayal (Woloch 2003). My major objective is to demonstrate the important connection between characterisation and structure in the sagas. By drawing attention to characters that I term narrative triggers, I offer a way of reading the sagas that relies both on the narrative conventions of tradition and on the less predictable, personal interactions between the cast of any given saga. In the case of both major and minor figures in the *Íslendingasögur* a certain type of character is often present to perform necessary motivational functions, allowing the plot to develop. In Part I of this thesis I emphasise the functional aspect of these characters, before exploring unusual examples that emphasise their individuality in Part II.

The motivation of the plot is linked throughout to the figure of the *ójafnaðarmaðr* ('inequitable person'). A secondary objective is to provide a clearer understanding of the nature and function of this commonly occurring character type. The *ójafnaðarmaðr* is frequently alluded to in scholarship (Andersson 1970; Byock 1989; Meulengracht Sørensen 1993), but this thesis provides the first in-depth study of the portrayal of these characters. The quality that informs them (*ójafnaðr*, 'inequity', lit. 'unevenness') is a threat to one of the core values of saga society (Miller 1990) and hints at an 'unbalancing' of social interactions and of the narrative equilibrium itself (cf. Gaskins 2005). That this unbalance leads to changes in the social structure of the setting is a key factor in driving the plots of the sagas along. For this reason, a detailed examination of the figure of the *ójafnaðarmaðr* is long overdue: they can be observed to perform a specific narrative function but are always fitted to suit their particular context.

Focussing on the structural conventions of character introduction, Part I (Chs 1–3) establishes my methodology and catalogues the examples of characters introduced as *ójafnaðarmenn*. The scope is limited to those introduced as such because it allows me to establish for the first time the full corpus and conventions of these characters and their introductions. Following developments in our understanding of the oral background to the sagas (Gísli Sigurðsson 2004; 2007; Ranković 2013), my approach to these narratives is built upon the evidence of their shared origins in pre-literate storytelling. Ch. 2 presents a full list of the characters introduced as *ójafnaðarmenn* and explores the patterns inherent in character introductions, mapping the way in which they impart information to facilitate the interpretation of a character in the wider context of the saga itself and across the genre. In Ch. 3, I examine the characters introduced within this context, categorising different types of narrative catalyst and assessing how the placement of these characters affects the structure of the sagas in which they are found.

Part II develops the narrative analysis on a saga by saga basis, expanding the parameters of the narrative trigger and exploring wider usage of words connected with the *ójafnaðarmaðr*. Across Chs 4–6 I analyse the narrative triggers and motivation of *Laxdæla saga*, *Grettis saga* and *Hrafnkels saga*. These sagas complicate our view of the functionality of the narrative trigger as well as our interpretation of the *ójafnaðarmaðr*. By exploring in detail the way these texts contextualise their disruptive figures I build up material that can be compared and contrasted with the conventions established in Part I.

The intersection between functionality and individuality in character brings certain aspects of the *Íslendingasögur* to the fore. Part II shows that in combination with the structural markers explored in Part I, the sagas employ the collective perspective of the general public, other characters and 'irrational' motivators such as fate (Miller 1986) to contribute to their techniques of characterisation. Because disruptive qualities speak inherently of a difference in the way an individual sees themselves and in the way the public sees them, or we as an audience are meant to see them, figures termed *ójafnaðarmaðr* are an ideal focal point for the development of this study.

## DECLARATION AND PREFACE

- This dissertation is the result of my own work and includes nothing which is the outcome of work done in collaboration except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text.
- It is not substantially the same as any that I have submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for a degree or diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University or similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text. I further state that no substantial part of my dissertation has already been submitted, or, is being concurrently submitted for any such degree, diploma or other qualification at the University of Cambridge or any other University of similar institution except as declared in the Preface and specified in the text
- It does not exceed the prescribed word limit (80,000 words excluding translations) for the relevant Degree Committee.

All translations in this thesis are my own unless otherwise stated. I use the standardised Old Norse-Icelandic spelling of personal names after the Íslenzk fornrit editions of the sagas (ÍF), but place-names in translations and outside quotations are normalised into Modern Icelandic: so Vatnsdalur not Vatnsdalr.

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It would not have occurred to me to continue with my studies beyond undergraduate level if it had not been for my supervisor's suggestion that I write a dissertation on Old Norse literature in the second year of my BA. I must thank Judy Quinn for pointing me in the right direction: she has been a fantastic, supportive supervisor to me ever since. In addition, Richard Dance, my advisor, has always been a reliable source of advice and assistance. Thanks are also due to my examiners, Heather O'Donoghue and Elizabeth Ashman Rowe for their careful reading and stimulating suggestions.

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PART I  
CORPUS AND CONVENTIONS (STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION)

1: INTRODUCTION

Villains act; heroes react. This thesis investigates how the actions of a certain subset of saga characters contribute to the structure of the narratives themselves. The central line of investigation is to discover how individuals can be said to trigger the actions of the plot, or contribute to a social or political shift that allows the ensuing conflict to proceed.<sup>1</sup> This is arranged across two Parts, consisting of three chapters each: Part I (Chapters 1–3) maps the conventions of a character type associated with this catalysing role; Part II (Chapters 4–6) expands the parameters used to establish a corpus in Part I, examining complex character case-studies drawn from familiar texts: *Laxdæla saga*, *Grettis saga* and *Hrafnkels saga*. The main objective is to demonstrate the important relationship between characters and the narrative structure of the *Íslendingasögur* ('Icelandic family sagas').

Within this thesis the variety and depth of characterisation in the genre is made evident, removing saga characters from problematic notions of mythic or legendary 'types'.<sup>2</sup> Functional typology is preferred, as it allows me to highlight the structural significance of certain types of character. I will nevertheless take an individualising approach to a group of characters that have a particular function in the narrative, demonstrating that the deployment of these characters has as much significance to the narrative structure of the *Íslendingasögur* as any themes or modes previously examined by structuralists.<sup>3</sup>

The characters that concern me are 'narrative triggers or catalysts' whose introduction and ensuing actions signal a social or narrational disruption expressed through conflict. I use the words

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<sup>1</sup> For the connection between conflict and plot see 1.iv.

<sup>2</sup> Lönnroth, *Critical Introduction*, ch. 3 *passim*.

<sup>3</sup> For example: Andersson, *Analytic Reading*; Lönnroth, *Critical Introduction*; Clover, *Medieval Saga*; Byock, *Feud*; Andersson, *Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*. Danielsson, *Om den isländska släktsagens uppbyggnad* falls into its own category of structural study, as it includes every narrative building block from characters to themes and actions in its elaborate representation of saga structure. In doing so, however, Danielsson divorces the structure from significance or meaning, ignoring the importance of the human element within the sagas and their audience as much as thematic studies are prone to do; Lönnroth, 'Structuralist Approaches', p. 72.

‘trigger’ and ‘catalyst’ interchangeably to describe the initial effect of the characters under discussion. There are many such types of character in the *Íslendingasögur*, but this study is focussed upon one subset in particular: the *ójafnaðarmaðr* (‘inequitable man’).<sup>4</sup> By focussing in Part I on characters that are termed such by the saga narrative itself (i.e. not by other characters or indirectly, by public opinion), similarities and differences in narrative practice and motivation are brought to the fore in my exploration of character introductions.

*Ójafnaðarmenn* are the focal point of this study because they may be thought of as a common representative of a certain type of saga character. Their unique quality is that they are ‘inequitable’ (literally ‘uneven’), meaning that they move against the basic expectations of reciprocity in the society depicted by the sagas.<sup>5</sup> *Ójafnaðr* (‘inequitable behaviour’) is not the only descriptor used of otherwise uncategorised human trouble makers in the sagas, yet the term has taken on a life of its own in saga scholarship more so than words such as *hávaðamaðr* (‘aggressively ambitious man’) or *ódældarmaðr* (‘overbearing man’).<sup>6</sup>

*Ójafnaðarmenn* are referenced by Jesse Byock, Vésteinn Ólason and William Ian Miller as though the term describes a fixed category of characters, whose uniformity of function and purpose may be taken for granted because they are all described using the same terminology.<sup>7</sup> The difficulty

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<sup>4</sup> Other types of characters whose destructive nature may come to mind include poets, outlaws and individuals connected with the supernatural, yet these categories have received more attention in scholarship than characters that are simply introduced with a less than charming personality. For example: Clunies Ross, ‘Skald Sagas as a Genre’ and other articles in the same volume; current research by Marion Poilvez (Háskóli Íslands) and Rebecca Merkelbach (University of Cambridge).

<sup>5</sup> Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, p. 301.

<sup>6</sup> The *ONP* gives the following results for these words: *hávaðamaðr* has a total of 31 entries, of which 22 are from *Íslendingasögur*; there are six entries for *ódældarmaðr*; there are 61 entries for the related *ódæll* (‘overbearing’), of which 32 are from *Íslendingasögur*; of the 24 entries for *ójafnaðarmaðr*, 16 come from *Íslendingasögur*. The *ONP* database is not complete, but it will be used to provide an overview of word usage across the corpus throughout this thesis.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example: Byock, *Feud* (‘The sagas have a specific term for ruthless and overly ambitious men’, pp. 29–30); Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking* (‘a word used to describe those who refuse compromise and deny others their rights’, p. 67). These examples, primarily aimed at an English-speaking audience that may need guidance in reading the sagas in context, include the term *ójafnaðarmaðr* in their indices. Miller’s latest work is no exception, but puzzlingly the only reference to an *ójafnaðarmaðr* (indexed as such in his book) is to a character who is not even labelled as such by *Njáls saga*! Miller views Þjóstólfr as more of an *ójafnaðarmaðr* than *Njáls saga*’s only explicit examples of the type, who are somewhat flippantly dismissed as ‘jerks’ (‘Why is your Axe Bloody?’, p. 288). In combination with Byock’s temptation to link Kjartan Ólafsson to *ójafnaðarmenn*

of taking the precise meaning of any such term in the *Íslendingasögur* for granted has been emphasised by studies such as Ármann Jakobsson's cautionary examination of what exactly is meant by *tröll*.<sup>8</sup> Preben Meulengracht Sørensen has displayed more nuance in his brief examination of *ójafnaðarmenn* than Vésteinn, Byock, Miller or Theodore Andersson managed, noting that the term encompasses a spectrum of characters, and that it seems to specify a quality more distinct than sheer villainy.<sup>9</sup> I do not choose *ójafnaðarmenn* as my case-studies therefore because I consider the term to be a transparent description of a fixed character type; rather it is a term that ought to be questioned more than it has been, that is used of a broad selection of individuals, but that clearly indicates a specific quality to incite caution and a negative opinion from the saga's audience. The lack of uniformity in the vocabulary of scholars discussing *ójafnaðarmenn*, coupled with the fact that *ójafnaðarmenn* feature repeatedly in such discussions, indicates that our understanding of the relevance of this term can and should be improved on. Finally, the word has not been examined for its narrative (as opposed to social) significance; the two are interlinked, but the narrative necessity of *ójafnaðarmenn* is at odds with the idea that society would seek to avoid the bearers of such a trait.

The need for the term to be explored in context, in more detail, and for *ójafnaðarmenn* to be compared across different saga narratives is therefore undeniable. Whilst it is true that there are characters described with different words who may be thought to perform a similar narrative function, this thesis allows for *hávaðamenn*, *ódældarmenn* and others to be incorporated into its findings (these qualities are listed at 2.ii.d, and are incorporated into the case-studies of Part II). However, the need to limit my samples to suit the length of this study and the fact that of these types of character the *ójafnaðarmaðr* is by far the most commonly alluded to in scholarly literature justifies my focus on this particular term.

In essence, as a narrative catalyst, the *ójafnaðarmaðr* may be considered representative of various non-magical, *human* threats to a society or narrative setting. *Ójafnaðarmenn* as depicted in the *Íslendingasögur* are varied enough to allow me to emphasise humanistic aspects of

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(*Feud*, p. 147), and Vésteinn Ólason's segue from the discussion of *ójafnaðarmenn* Þórólfr bægifótr and Þorbjörn Þjóðreksson to characters not described with that word, Klaufi and Mörðr Valgarðsson (*Dialogues with the Viking Age*, pp. 157–8), it is clear that there is a desire to typologise these characters, but that our understanding of the way in which the sagas use the word it is not currently nuanced enough for the typologies we imagine to be useful.

<sup>8</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, 'Trollish Acts of Þorgrímr the Witch'.

<sup>9</sup> Meulengracht Sørensen, *Fortælling og ære*, pp. 195–7; cf. Andersson, 'Displacement of the Heroic Ideal', pp. 580–2.

characterisation as well as functional aspects related to structural typology; I will explore what it means for a narrative when a chieftain *ójafnaðarmaðr* is introduced as opposed to a kinless *ójafnaðarmaðr* without alliances. This thesis therefore aims to provide the first detailed consideration of the possibilities of the type of character that is termed *ójafnaðarmaðr*.

Part I establishes the corpus and conventions surrounding *ójafnaðarmenn* who are introduced by their sagas as such. The criteria in Part I exclude rhetorical devices such as the use of 'þótti mǫnnum' ('people thought') to indicate a character's *ójafnaðr*, or references to someone who is *engi/ekki jafnaðarmaðr* ('not an equitable person'). Chapter 1 sets out the scholarly background to the study of characters and structure in the *Íslendingasögur*; Chapter 2 probes the construction of introductory passages, demonstrating the ways in which each *ójafnaðarmaðr*, no matter how short-lived he is, can be described to fit the narrative in which he appears. The list of characters introduced as *ójafnaðarmaðr* or *ójafnaðarfullr* ('wholly inequitable') reveals patterns in their placement in the wider narrative, which are then explored in detail in Chapter 3. Chapter 3 begins with a case-study, in which *Eyrbyggja saga*'s unusually high number of *ójafnaðarmenn* are considered in the context of its notoriously episodic structure. The question of the narrative role of these characters is then taken up, and functional subdivisions of the remaining examples of *ójafnaðarmenn* from Chapter 2 are suggested.

Many of the characters examined in Part I of this thesis are minor trouble-makers, but Part II expands the category of the narrative catalyst established by Chapters 1–3. The case-studies of Chapters 4–6 problematize the question of public and personal perception that is inherent to a discussion of a character that is described as 'inequitable'. A disparity between how an individual sees themselves and how the society depicted by the sagas sees them, or how other characters interpret their actions, underpins all the 'disruptive' qualities observed in association with *ójafnaðr*. Chapter 4 offers a reading of *Laxdæla saga* and *Grettis saga* that emphasises the contradictory, but complementary, use of personality and fate in bringing about these stories' central tragedies. Questions of social status and narrative genre intertwine as 'irrational' forces including fate, prophecies, curses and predictions obscure our identification of an individual, human narrative trigger.<sup>10</sup> Chapter 5 continues to question the role of public opinion, building upon the study of Grettir's difficult personality by examining the effect of having a protagonist who is introduced as an *ójafnaðarmaðr* by the saga. This case-study of *Hrafnkels saga* combines the findings of previous chapters to offer a new reading of the mercurial Hrafnkell Freysgoði and his saga. Finally, Chapter 6 brings together the conclusions of the rest of the thesis, re-evaluating how we describe characters and how they affect saga structure and *vice versa*.

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<sup>10</sup> The term 'irrational' is used after Miller, 'Dreams, Prophecies and Sorcery', p. 103.

The case-studies of Part II are well-known and popular texts. They have been chosen because they provide examples of the broad possibilities of narrative structure in the genre we term *Íslendingasögur*; multi-generational epics with difficult-to-discern protagonists; stories in which the pride of the protagonist has been interpreted as evidence for a particularly learned, Christian composition; sagas which contain no characters who meet the specific criteria needed to be included in Chapters 2 or 3. Between them, this selection allows for an exploration of the most pertinent questions of saga scholarship, but it also demonstrates the flexibility of the form and the consistent function of narrative catalysts such as the *ójafnaðarmaðr*.

In the present chapter I discuss previous studies of the structure of the sagas that have focussed on themes and events, but ignored characters. The treatment of characters in these structural studies is afterwards contrasted with recent developments in the field of narratology that highlight the relationship between characters and narrative structure. The function of characters and the language of describing that function is examined, before I provide a more detailed explanation of the ways in which the *ójafnaðarmaðr*, or narrative catalyst, excels as a starting point for a study of character and structure.

Structure cannot be discussed without considering the composition of the sagas and it has been convincingly argued in recent years that the sagas could not tell their stories in the ways they do without access to public memory, or some form of 'immanent' tradition that now lies below the surface of what has survived in written form.<sup>11</sup> Throughout this thesis I therefore consider the motivations for telling a story about a particular individual, examining the way in which the plots are generally built around the actions of people rather than around arbitrary themes or social constructs.

### *1.i: Saga structure*

The study of the structure of the *Íslendingasögur* is inextricably bound up with twentieth-century theories on the composition of oral stories. From Vladimir Propp's dissections of folktales, to Albert Lord and Milman Parry's search for formulae that made the work of the oral poet easier,<sup>12</sup> saga scholars such as Theodore Andersson and Lars Lönnroth developed their approaches to the sagas into an analytic perspective on the themes and character-types that could act as a guiding principle for the genre as a whole (often with the intention of discerning or reaffirming a chronological

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<sup>11</sup> Clover, 'Long Prose Form'; Gísli Sigurðsson, *Medieval Icelandic Saga*.

<sup>12</sup> Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*; Lord, *Singer of Tales*.

development of the form).<sup>13</sup> Both have since retreated somewhat from the dogmatic approach of the 1960s and '70s, and there seems to be a diminished interest in saga structure since Jesse Byock's social-anthropological study of feud structure and Tommy Danielsson's meticulous examination of the *Íslendingasögur*, both of which emerged in the 1980s.<sup>14</sup> The kind of structuralist approach applied to the sagas was generally not influenced by semiotics and the search for overarching logic or meaning behind the narratives studied, rather it was used as a tool for uncovering the origins of and construction methods behind the sagas and it is in this latter tradition that I follow.<sup>15</sup>

In a review of structural approaches to the sagas, Lönnroth observed: 'saga studies that emphasize simple narrative schemes, formulaic patterns, and recurring action patterns to the exclusion of everything else tend to be as one-sided and, in the long run, boring as a study of mankind entirely built on a systematic examination of the human skeleton.'<sup>16</sup> Yet he also sought to remind us that the 'narrative grammar' of the sagas can still be elucidated by certain aspects of a structural approach. It has never made much sense to look at these things 'to the exclusion of everything else' and attempting to do so often makes a story seem stale or mechanical.<sup>17</sup> Lord and Parry's ground-breaking work on oral formulae, whilst stimulating to scholarship in many ways, nevertheless fixed our view of the value of formulae for decades; they were seen as a replacement for compositional creativity; something unoriginal and unartistic, a lumpen space-filler in a poem.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Andersson, *Analytic Reading*; Lönnroth, *Critical Introduction*.

<sup>14</sup> Byock, *Feud*; Danielsson, *Om den ísländske släktsagans uppbyggnad*; see also, more generally, the collection of essays (also from the 1980s), *Structure and Meaning in Old Norse Literature*, ed. Lindow et al.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Torfi Tulinius, *The Matter of the North*, pp. 34–5.

<sup>16</sup> Lönnroth, 'Structuralist Approaches', p. 73.

<sup>17</sup> This is largely because these thematic structural frameworks always seek to be so comprehensive. Although much inevitably ends up being excluded, the intention always appears to be to exclude nothing. To use a statistical comparison, it is akin to 'overfitting' a predictive system; if too many variables are incorporated then no significant data stands out (Silver, *The Signal and the Noise*, p. 163). The structural models in Danielsson, *Om den ísländske släktsagans uppbyggnad* are practically the definition of overfitting. See also Andersson's early and continued distaste for *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Vatnsdæla saga*, which were included in his study despite their deviations from his model. This reluctance to exclude anomalous narratives has led to the author's seemingly vindictive distaste for the two texts (Clunies Ross, *Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga*, p. 127).

<sup>18</sup> Foley, *Immanent Art*, esp. Introduction and ch. 1. Cf. Lönnroth *Critical Introduction*, pp. 54–5: according to him, formulae such as farm visits or the giving of gifts are 'insignificant and uninteresting to the saga as a whole. A force of habit, strengthened by the conventional expectations of the audience, encouraged the

In the 1990s John Miles Foley demonstrated that formulae have several functions: they carry a cultural significance, they frequently invoke a wider tradition or other story and their use brings these things to the mind of a knowledgeable audience. Foley referred to this as ‘traditional referentiality’, reminding modern readers that what seems inappropriate, incomplete or uninventive to us no doubt carried greater significance for its original audience.<sup>19</sup> Therefore the placement of formulae in a tale can reveal deeper layers of significance by alluding to values or positions held by their user’s society, or by referencing a hero’s other exploits, either for contrast with, or emphasis of, the story at hand. In addition, Foley’s work on heroic epithets demonstrates how a character and their associated traditional background can prove central to our interpretations of a particular poem or scene.<sup>20</sup>

An explicitly artistic parallel to Foley’s interpretation of the use of formulae might be found in Ruth Webb’s reminder to modern scholars of exactly what the classical technique of *ekphrasis* entailed.<sup>21</sup> Webb demonstrates that it was originally a rhetorical technique that aimed to paint a mental picture – not simply a description of another *objet d’art*. Within its scope is the use of ‘vivid language’ in a function that sounds very much like Foley’s description of traditional referentiality: ‘the imagination to which vivid language was thought to appeal was more a store-house of images derived from sense perception and informed by a common culture. To be sure of the effect of his speech a speaker needed to ensure that his subject-matter conformed to his audience’s expectations and prior knowledge.’<sup>22</sup>

Foley’s work was influenced by Carol Clover’s 1986 study of ‘immanence’ in oral traditions; the notion that oral societies maintain many potential narratives throughout popular or cultural memory that do not necessarily ever get fully told.<sup>23</sup> Subsequently, Foley’s monograph informed Gísli Sigurðsson’s work on immanence and oral traditions in Iceland.<sup>24</sup> Although not structuralist in the sense that the mid-twentieth century’s saga studies were, these works nevertheless help to

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inclusion of unnecessary details. This is a weakness inherent in all oral literature and in many works based on oral tradition.’

<sup>19</sup> Foley, *Immanent Art*, p. 50.

<sup>20</sup> Foley, *Immanent Art*, ch. 6.

<sup>21</sup> Webb, ‘Ekphrasis Ancient and Modern’.

<sup>22</sup> Webb, ‘Ekphrasis Ancient and Modern’, p. 13; Foley, *Immanent Art*, p. xv.

<sup>23</sup> Clover, ‘Long Prose Form’.

<sup>24</sup> Gísli Sigurðsson, *Medieval Icelandic Saga*; ‘\*Immanent Saga of Guðmundr ríki’.

elucidate the structure of sagas (their 'narrative grammar' in Lönnroth's words).<sup>25</sup> Additionally, the problems of discussing and evaluating the construction of stories originating in oral tradition have been recognised in folklore studies. A similar discomfort with the strict categories of structuralism, inspired as they were by folklorists such as Propp, and the development of Motif-Indices of folklore, is expressed by Marina Warner:

[T]hese indices are ultimately self-defeating. The insight they give into what makes fairy tales compelling is limited: the universalizing method which ipso facto looks for resemblances, not distinctiveness, erases historical and social conditions; the comparisons and sets do not allow for differences in reception according to changing contexts, and they give no clue to the pleasure the fairy tales inspire or the reasons for that pleasure.<sup>26</sup>

That is not to say that observing similarities between stories and characters is not productive. Rather (like Foley's development of Lord and Parry's approach to formulae), Warner emphasises the importance of exploring the similarities and the variations within their proper contexts: narrative, social and historical.

Another aspect of saga structure that has occupied scholars has been the centrality of feud to the *Íslendingasögur*. Andersson claimed in his 1967 monograph that the narratives revolved around scenes of climactic conflict, whilst in 1982 Byock dissected the structure of the feud itself.<sup>27</sup> Because Byock's work did not seek to explain the sagas as literary or orally derived narratives, but rather as anthropological sources, I will not dwell on his structural work here. Lönnroth has noted that, in reference to work undertaken by Andersson and other literary structuralists, 'Byock seems to miss the point when he complains that such schemes only deal with "the dramatic high points" of the story. For it is indeed these "dramatic high points" that must be of primary concern for a literary scholar or critic, not the minute intricacies of feuding or legal advocacy'.<sup>28</sup> Yet I would argue that an interest in the minutiae of feud and legal narratives does not preclude a study of the narrative structure leading up to, and away from, dramatic high points in the saga; the narrative trigger must be recognised in order to trace the tension that escalates into a violent climax in the narrative.

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<sup>25</sup> Clover did take a structuralist approach in her *Medieval Saga*, but like others, she has stepped back from this approach; cf. Clover, 'Composing Facts'.

<sup>26</sup> Warner, *Once Upon a Time*, p. xxi.

<sup>27</sup> Andersson, *Analytic Reading*; Byock, *Feud*.

<sup>28</sup> Lönnroth, 'Structuralist Approaches', p. 70.



### 1.ii: Character

Of the studies mentioned in 1.i, only Gísli Sigurðsson's approach focuses on character.<sup>29</sup> Whilst an immanent biography of the ambiguous chieftain Guðmundr ríki emerges from Gísli's work, my thesis applies aspects of Gísli's comparative approach to a *category* of characters instead of a particular individual, in order to gain insights on that subset of saga character, as well as on the individual sagas themselves.

Earlier attitudes towards saga characters seem to have been constrained by the structuralists' analytical influences just as much as approaches to the rest of the components of the sagas often were. Within Propp's character groupings, for instance, he proposed a '*genus*' of villain, and a variety of '*species*' of villains who acted in different ways at different points of the narrative.<sup>30</sup> Similarly Lönnroth, more immediately influenced by Andreas Heusler, suggested a number of species of saga villain, based largely upon mythological and legendary referents. A low status, violent villain tended to conform to Lönnroth's '*berserk type*', whilst a schemer who did not get his hands dirty was the '*Loki type*'.<sup>31</sup>

Lönnroth sought to view the sagas through a similar typology to the one Propp applied to his folktales (Lönnroth's disclaimer about the variety of characters within his categories is reminiscent of Propp's admission that one person in a tale can fulfil various roles), and he held dogmatic views regarding the '*realism*' of saga characters.<sup>32</sup> He is excoriating in his opinion of the Norwegian novelist Hans E. Kinck's 1916 psychoanalytical reading of saga characters,<sup>33</sup> and he references early freeprose advocate and folklorist (and Kinck's contemporary) Andreas Heusler to emphasise his opinion:

'He [Heusler] issued a much-needed warning against psychologizing about individual saga characters. Hallgerðr is no Hedda Gabler, but rather the stereotyped, proud, and revenge-seeking Valkyrie-type so frequently found in Germanic tradition. Gunnarr is "Siegfried in an Icelandic farmer's costume". On the whole, Heusler laid the grounds for a more precise analysis of *Njála*'s style by briefly discussing some of its typical formulae, stereotyped motifs, and rhetorical devices and the way they are used in the narrative to

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<sup>29</sup> Gísli Sigurðsson, '*\*Immanent Saga of Guðmundr ríki*'.

<sup>30</sup> Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, p. 25.

<sup>31</sup> Lönnroth, *Critical Introduction*, p. 63. See below, pp. 17–8.

<sup>32</sup> Lönnroth, *Critical Introduction*, pp. 66–7; Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, pp. 79–83.

<sup>33</sup> Kinck, 'Skikkelser den ikke forstod'.

heighten suspense, prepare the audience for a dramatic climax, etc. A technical dissection of this sort could not easily be made as long as the sagas were thought to be a more or less direct imitation of nature.<sup>34</sup>

It is to be hoped that Lönnroth's views on the boundary between the 'imitation of nature' and the technicalities of traditional, orally-derived literature have softened alongside his views on structuralism.<sup>35</sup> Just as Foley showed the cultural, traditional and artistic merit of the use of formulae, so this thesis aims to show that traditionally, formulaically described characters can be a part of the technical composition of the sagas whilst also imitating, or at least appearing reminiscent of, aspects of humanity. Although there can be little doubt that Kinck's psychoanalytical fretting on behalf of Skarpheðinn and Hallgerðr was very much of its time, Freudian approaches have reappeared in recent saga studies.<sup>36</sup> This theoretical work, incorporating the studies of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, is largely outside the scope of this thesis, but the literary approach of Ármann Jakobsson provides an unusual example of recent saga scholarship that focuses on *characters*.<sup>37</sup>

All the approaches to saga characters mentioned above can be summarised by explaining the three main perspectives we, as an audience, have on these characters: our own perspective, at a modern remove; the perspective of other characters within the saga text; and the perspective of the 'saga itself', the impersonal narrative voice that introduces the characters to the story. Lönnroth and Heusler's approach rejects any attempt to identify with these characters from a modern, or a humanistic, standpoint. Kinck's approach did not quite ignore the voice of the saga itself, but berated it severely for having mistaken priorities in neglecting Hallgerðr's point of view. Yet somewhere between these extremes, we can nevertheless identify the construction through the narrative of a certain image of a person – traditional enough to react in the ways we expect in saga-

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<sup>34</sup> Lönnroth, *Critical Introduction*, p. 14, quoting Heusler, *Die Geschichte vom weisen Njal*, p. 12, Lönnroth's translation.

<sup>35</sup> After all, Hedda Gabler is just as much a creation intended to resemble a human being as one supposes Hallgerðr, Gunnarr and Siegfried were; the process by which the storyteller created their character and the references they drew on may be different, as well as the representative values assigned to a character in terms of depth and autonomy within the narrative, yet Gabler is a character within a tradition of storytelling as much as the saga characters are. Cf. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, pp. 54–5.

<sup>36</sup> For example: Ármann Jakobsson, 'Egils saga and Empathy'; Phelpsstead, 'Size Matters'; Tirosh, 'Víga-Njáll'; Torfi Tulinius, 'Deconstructing Snorri'; the recent course at Háskóli Íslands 'MIS701M Literature and Psychoanalysis. From Medieval Romance and Saga to the Modern Novel'.

<sup>37</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, *Nine Saga Studies*.

typical situations, but natural enough, human and individual enough that these stories continue to resonate so strongly with a modern audience. Jón Karl Helgason's summary of the post-medieval reception of the sagas and Andrew Wawn's warm appraisal of later interpretations of *Vatnsdæla saga* should be an antidote to the tendency to completely disregard any identification we may feel with saga characters.<sup>38</sup> This desire is to a large part what keeps us interested in the *Íslendingasögur* and it deserves much of the credit for the fact that the stories survived to be read and retold to this day. The classical epics that inspired the studies of Lord, Parry, Foley and others may well have been nothing without their formulae and building-blocks and stock scenes; but equally they would have been nothing without Achilles or Odysseus, characters that can hardly be squeezed into a typological box without losing much of what makes them memorable and exciting.

To return to the language of Propp — and hopefully not to stretch his metaphor too far — where he identified a genus (e.g. 'villain') and a number of species within that genus (from a villain who abducts or maims to a villain who starts a war), this thesis examines a particular *species* of saga character, and within that species looks for the differences between individuals raised in various environments.<sup>39</sup> Thus the placement of the character within the narrative as a whole, the traditional way in which they are introduced into the saga and the broad characteristics of their 'species' are examined, but the approach is philological, as in Foley's study, with the intention of allowing for different priorities within different saga narratives.<sup>40</sup> Additionally, as Propp's villains were designated such because of their role in the narrative, so too will I seek a language to describe the roles of the saga characters discussed here.

The link between character and structure is something that has been recognised relatively recently in the field of narratology (see 1.iv). Whilst it would be foolhardy to apply techniques developed for the elucidation of the nineteenth-century novel directly to the sagas (such would position them only as 'imitations of nature' after all, ignoring the traditional aspects of the narrative grammar),<sup>41</sup> there is much of interest to be gathered from an examination of narratological approaches.

The most common way of categorising characters in fiction remains E. M. Forster's distinction between those who are 'flat' and those who are 'round.'<sup>42</sup> He explained an aspect of this distinction thus: '[t]he test of a round character is whether it is capable of surprising in a convincing

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<sup>38</sup> Jón Karl Helgason, 'Continuity?'; Wawn, 'Visions and Versions'.

<sup>39</sup> Propp, *Morphology of the Folktale*, pp. 25; 31–4.

<sup>40</sup> Foley, *Immanent Art*, p. xi.

<sup>41</sup> Cf. Torfi Tulinius, *The Matter of the North*, pp. 36–8.

<sup>42</sup> Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, p. 73. Cf. Jannidis, 'Character', §2.8; §3.8.

way. If it never surprises, it is flat. If it does not convince, it is a flat pretending to be round. It has the incalculability of life about it — life within the pages of a book.<sup>43</sup> The paradox of this ‘incalculability’ is recognised by Forster when he acknowledges that an author is capable of showing us the internal motivations of their character; which makes them seem to be hyper-real.<sup>44</sup> In everyday life we cannot know or understand every little detail of internal personhood or motivation in another individual, yet a novel can allow us to understand its characters in this way — and in this sense the sagas provide a better imitation of reality than characters in novels with thoroughly realised direct, internal characterisation.<sup>45</sup> Forster also suggested that only a character whose development throughout the story could be attested deserved to be labelled ‘round’.<sup>46</sup> This has since been called into question:<sup>47</sup> saga characters cannot generally be observed to undergo a development of personality (the use of introductory passages makes their personality appear strikingly static and inflexible), yet some may be thought of as ‘round’ within the parameters of their society.<sup>48</sup>

Whilst this assumption is questioned in Chapter 5, here, by way of demonstration, I present the following examples from *Laxdæla saga* and *Njáls saga* of surprising behaviour that suggest roundness of character: Þórðr Ingunnarson’s magnanimous decision not to punish Bróka-Auðr for causing him a severe wound;<sup>49</sup> Hrútr Herjólfsson’s gift of a ring to the child who had mocked him;<sup>50</sup> Njáll and Gunnarr’s stubbornly good-willed exchange of compensation money;<sup>51</sup> Óláfr pái’s all-too-knowing refusal of the Irish throne and his persistent disinterest in vengeance for vengeance’s sake.<sup>52</sup> Of course, all of these examples can be otherwise explained, despite the fact that they are

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<sup>43</sup> Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, p. 81.

<sup>44</sup> Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, p. 69.

<sup>45</sup> The terms ‘direct’ and ‘indirect’ characterisation refer to whether a character’s attributes are explicitly ascribed to them, or whether they are based on the audience’s inferences; Jannidis, ‘Character’, §2.5. I view saga characters as a mixture of these types: character introductions ascribe characteristics (both internal and external) to them directly, yet one may make inferences indirectly ‘based partly on world knowledge and ... character knowledge’ (Jannidis, ‘Character’, §2.5): see Chapter 6.

<sup>46</sup> Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, p. 74.

<sup>47</sup> Jannidis, ‘Character’, § 3.8.

<sup>48</sup> Jon Geir Høyersten concludes that saga characters can indeed be said to have ‘personality’ as we would understand it, although he appears to infer that their personality is not one that can be altered either internally or externally. Høyersten, ‘Idea of Personality’, esp. p. 208.

<sup>49</sup> ÍF 5, 98.

<sup>50</sup> ÍF 12, 29.

<sup>51</sup> ÍF 12, 91–118, *passim*.

<sup>52</sup> ÍF 5, 59.

surprising: a good person in the sagas would not be expected to enact their reprisal on a woman or a young child; Njáll and Gunnarr choose not to let the actions of women affect their own personal honour; Óláfr has to refuse the throne because whatever historical tradition there was about him states he was never king of Ireland.<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless, Óláfr's consistent rejection of feud culture throughout the narrative of *Laxdæla saga* appears to stem more from the portrayal of his individual personality than from the fact that his wealth and status afford him the luxury of ignoring assaults on his honour, and few would doubt the depth of Njáll and Gunnarr's friendship and its centrality to the tragedy of *Njáls saga*. Similarly the mildness of Hrútr's response in the same narrative becomes surprising when his generosity is also factored in, and Þórðr's magnanimity in *Laxdæla saga* is more meaningful given what we might infer about his lingering guilt from the spreading of (likely false) rumours about Auðr's dress. Auðr's behaviour itself is surprising and gives a very minor character a powerful, memorable hint of personality; we start to wonder what kind of woman reacts to hearing false rumours about her transvestitism by rising to the opportunity, owning the male dress and the male honour code and obtaining vengeance for herself.<sup>54</sup> If this seems like too modern a response (would the original audience not have seen her as a burlesque, a figure of fun railing uselessly against the saga's glorious heroine?) then it is worth bearing in mind that the rest of *Laxdæla saga* betrays very little in the way of a sense of humour and can still be regarded as the most empathetic towards the status of women out of all the *Íslendingasögur*.<sup>55</sup>

### 1.iii: Structure and character

In his 2001 study of personality in the *Íslendingasögur*, Jon Geir Høyersten came to the conclusion that medieval Icelanders understood personality in much the same way that we do, and that saga characters can indeed be said 'to communicate conceptions and experiences of what people are, what they ought to be, and what they ought to strive for in their self-realization'.<sup>56</sup> Now that I have

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<sup>53</sup> These examples are all those where we might expect something worse to happen. Yet surprising acts do not simply have to occur because we expect the worst of people in a society where feud played such an important role: cf. 5.ii.

<sup>54</sup> ÍF 5, 95–8.

<sup>55</sup> 4.iii.a.

<sup>56</sup> Høyersten, 'Idea of Personality', p. 210. Høyersten rejects the idea that continental romances influenced the development of personality in the *Íslendingasögur*, pointing instead to the fact that the sagas do not contradict the medieval Church's ideas on empathy (Høyersten, 'Idea of Personality', p. 209). As with many

established that the sagas contain individuals who can be discussed as ‘round’ and as having personalities (as well, of course, as all the flat characters who never surprise us with their behaviour), it must be demonstrated how they hold the structure of the sagas themselves together. Alex Woloch’s 2003 monograph on minor characters in the nineteenth-century novel appears still to be unique in its approach to character and structure. Discussing the *Iliad* in his prologue he notes that ‘[t]he poet’s point of view, although omniscient, is never secure. It wavers between representing individuals in terms of their own particularity and integrating them into a larger aesthetic structure that, finally, revolves around a singular personality.’<sup>57</sup> This applies to a greater or lesser extent to all sagas — or perhaps, more accurately, to sections of sagas, given that the ‘singular personality’ may differ at different points of a saga such as *Njáls saga* or *Laxdæla saga*. Woloch’s approach seeks to establish why narratives allocate the space they do to the characters they do, observing how this affects the momentum of the action and its motivation.<sup>58</sup>

Woloch’s work emerges from a frustration at the way in which characters are handled by structuralist studies. The ‘coordinated narrative structure’ of the novels he deals with cannot be identified in the same way in traditional, orally derived literature (as he acknowledges),<sup>59</sup> but the manner in which an individual emerges as protagonist, and the ways in which other characters revolve around that individual, are worth pursuing. Woloch summarises the reason that it is so important to look at character’s relationship to structure:

Characterization has been such a divisive question in twentieth-century literary theory — and has created recurrent disputes between humanist and structural (or mimetic and formal) positions — because the literary character is itself divided, always emerging at the juncture between structure and reference. In other words, a literary *dialectic* that operates dynamically within the narrative text gets transformed into a theoretical *contradiction*, presenting students of literature with an unpalatable choice: language *or* reference, structure *or* individuality.<sup>60</sup>

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such articles, Høyersten’s case-study is *Njáls saga*, which I would argue is too much of an anomaly to be used as a blanket guide to all other *Íslendingasögur*.

<sup>57</sup> Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, p. 3.

<sup>58</sup> Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, p. 13.

<sup>59</sup> Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, pp. 15; 322.

<sup>60</sup> Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, p. 17.

Although it is important to distinguish between a narrative planned and plotted by a single individual and one that was potentially moulded and reformed by many re-tellers and their audiences over the years, the idea of the divided nature of character remains useful. An author's reasons for choosing their protagonist may be more idiosyncratic than any reason we might suggest for a saga's focus on one character over another. Yet at some point in the tradition — whether in oral re-tellings, in the act of first writing a version of a story down, in the act of copying it from another manuscript, or in the decision to re-tell a story heard read aloud from a manuscript — the story crystallised around the characters who now seem to us to be the protagonists. Why were they especially memorable? What was unusual about their story?<sup>61</sup>

Woloch's theory of the character-system and how each character in a text frames the protagonist informs the case-studies of Chapters 3–6 below,<sup>62</sup> although my focus remains on how the genre as a whole treats a subsection of characters generally found in the position of adversary to the protagonist, or as the initiator of trouble in the narrative. Previous analysis of the sagas using network theory has shown how the cast of a saga generally interlocks in a very lifelike manner, although these studies focussed on its social implications rather than the literary or structural significance of characters and their interactions.<sup>63</sup> Nevertheless, Richard Gaskins emphasises the fact that saga structure inherently allows for a strong protagonist to lead the story.<sup>64</sup> Gaskins provides a crucial starting point regarding the relationship between trouble-makers and narrative structure: '[t]he narrative action is centered on individual characters whose behaviour disrupts the hazy social equilibrium with which each saga begins — that "once-upon-a-time" of literary beginnings.'<sup>65</sup> These disruptive figures describe precisely the role of the narrative catalyst, so I will now explain my focus on a particular subsection of saga characters, using the sagas' own language to distinguish this category.

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<sup>61</sup> The answer may at times be 'nothing'; they just happened to be the ancestor of someone who was powerful in the thirteenth century and needed or wanted to justify their status: for example, Sveinbjörn Rafnsson, *Studier i Landnámabók*, pp. 186–7.

<sup>62</sup> Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, p. 18.

<sup>63</sup> Gaskins, 'Network Dynamics'; Mac Carron and Kenna, 'Network Analysis'. Mac Carron and Kenna's analysis is more statistical than literary or anthropological. They omit *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Heiðarvíga saga* as well as the eastern sagas from their study with no explanation; it is neither a comprehensive analysis of the connections in the western sagas therefore, nor a complete overview of all sagas. Yet it does raise some interesting questions about what makes *Gísli saga* such a different type of narrative from the regional and national narratives it is compared with.

<sup>64</sup> Gaskins, 'Network Dynamics', p. 205.

<sup>65</sup> Gaskins, 'Network Dynamics', p. 205; see also Todorov, *Poetics of Prose*, pp. 111–12.

#### 1.iv: The language of social and narrational disruption

Gaskins' observation provides two essential qualities for the type of character that this thesis is focussed on: firstly that they have a disruptive role in society, and secondly this disruption may be said to initiate the action of the story, or at least a change in the kind of action described. This remains a dauntingly broad subset of characters, however, and a vocabulary suitable for discussing them must still be pinpointed. The initiation of conflict, whilst discussed in passing by the structural studies mentioned above, has never received close attention. Byock relies upon the general assumption that conflict was central to the sagas because Iceland was so resource-poor, and competition for mastery of these resources was rife.<sup>66</sup> This assumption is not universally accepted, nor is it explored in as much depth in his study;<sup>67</sup> it also neglects the literary aspect of this part of saga narrative.<sup>68</sup>

In his six point scheme for saga structure, Theodore Andersson included 'conflict' as an essential point, appearing immediately after 'introduction'.<sup>69</sup> He notes that the introduction usually provides the experienced saga audience with a clear picture of where conflict is likely to emerge and who will probably be the instigator, pointing to the 'scoundrel', 'often an *ójafnaðarmaður*', as the individual expected to initiate conflict.<sup>70</sup> Allusions to the *ójafnaðarmaður* as a catch-all term for troublesome individuals in the sagas is a recurring theme of the scholarship, yet the sagas' own examples of these characters are rarely examined in any close detail, nor is what it means to be an *ójafnaðarmaður* in the society or narrative of the *Íslendingasögur*.

For instance, a connection to the *ójafnaðarmaður* is not made explicitly in Andersson's section on conflict itself, where he refers variously to 'the irritant', 'antagonists', 'agent provocateurs', 'rascals', 'villains', 'troublemakers' and 'provocations'.<sup>71</sup> Whilst Víga-Hrapp in *Njáls saga* is a villain, Hoensa-Þórir is simply an inflated 'rascal' who took over a narrative to the extent that it adopted his name – the rascal being a third party who Andersson distinguishes from the

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<sup>66</sup> Byock, *Feud*, p. 204.

<sup>67</sup> Hermann Pálsson, 'Review of *Feud*', p. 588; Miller, 'Review of *Feud*', p. 377.

<sup>68</sup> In narrative terms conflict might of course be assumed to be both ubiquitous and necessary within Western writing, see Abbott, *Introduction to Narrative*, p. 55. How conflict is presented and who causes it according to the narrative remain pertinent questions, however.

<sup>69</sup> Andersson, *Analytic Reading*, p. 4.

<sup>70</sup> Andersson, *Analytic Reading*, p. 7.

<sup>71</sup> Andersson, *Analytic Reading*, pp. 12–16.



character who might more directly be thought of as an antagonist.<sup>72</sup> This vocabulary remains vague and does not seek to classify characters in the same way that Andersson classifies subsections of the plot.

Lönnroth makes a more concerted effort to assign saga characters to groups with specific functions, and he also connects this to their introductions:

The beginning of a narrative segment is marked here by the frequently used phrase *X hét maðr*, a kind of transition formula which also contains necessary information. Next is the obligatory genealogy, which may be long or short depending on the status of the character and the information available to the author. Here Sigmundr's appearance and character are described in conventional phrases found throughout saga portraits of typical troublemakers: *mikill ok sterkr, skáld gott, hávaðamaðr mikill, spottsamr ok ódæll*, etc.<sup>73</sup>

Seeking a functional category in which to place the 'typical troublemaker', Lönnroth builds on the vocabulary of Propp: '[t]he Villain and the Villain's Helper usually initiate the conflicts and work against the interest of the Hero, although they may well be his kinsmen and thus "officially" on his side'.<sup>74</sup> Like Propp's 'species', Lönnroth subdivides his villains into 'stock characters' who fulfil the role of villain but do so in different ways and for different reasons; a 'Loki type', a 'vengeful Prima Donna type' (with reference to Brynhildr specifically) and a 'Berserk type' illustrate the variety within *Njáls saga*.<sup>75</sup> Mörðr Valgarðsson is probably the only saga villain who conforms thoroughly to Lönnroth's 'Loki type'; and given that every woman in the saga seems to be a 'Prima Donna' (vengeful or otherwise) in his eyes, I do not think the term is useful.<sup>76</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Andersson, *Analytic Reading*, p. 14.

<sup>73</sup> Lönnroth, *Critical Introduction*, p. 49: 'a man called X'; 'big and strong, a good poet, a very self-assertive man, mocking and overbearing'.

<sup>74</sup> Lönnroth, *Critical Introduction*, p. 62. He also cites Hruby, *Zur Technik der isländischen Saga* and Heller, *Der literarische Darstellung der Frau* as influences behind his character groupings.

<sup>75</sup> Lönnroth, *Critical Introduction*, pp. 63, 66.

<sup>76</sup> It is very rare that a female character can be identified as the original, independently acting cause of conflict in saga narrative (i.e. conflict occurs because of her actions, not because she is a prize for male characters to fight over). A *hvet* ('whetting'), for instance, only occurs in response to a serious insult or death. Hallgerðr Höskuldsdóttir may come close to fulfilling this role in *Njáls saga* — certainly Hrútr's comment about her *þjófsaugun* ('thief's eyes') implies that the narrator would like us to lay the blame on her (ÍF 12, 7) — but also significant are her father's misjudgement in arranging for her a poor marriage, her foster-father Þjóstólfr's lack

This leaves the ‘Berserk type’, who is ‘brutal, noisy, impetuous, and rather foolish’, and unsurprisingly, sometimes a *berserkr*.<sup>77</sup> In the feud episodes of family sagas, he is usually pictured as a mere roughneck without any supernatural powers. He is frequently characterized as *ójafnaðarmaðr* or *hávaðamaðr*, i.e., as a person who bullies others, makes trouble, and is impossible to get along with. Such persons bring bad luck (*ógæfa*) to the community and may become outlawed – just like the Grettir type, with whom they invite comparison.<sup>78</sup>

The identification of tropes can undoubtedly be useful tools for the understanding of narrative, and they are by necessity somewhat reductive, but Lönnroth’s ‘Berserk type’ is a generalisation of a number of different character types in the sagas.<sup>79</sup> Old Norse *berserkir* and the modern English understanding of a berserk, or of ‘going berserk’ are vastly different things. Lönnroth’s category is not helpful for understanding either in the sagas, as *berserkir* are far from common in the *Íslendingasögur* (one would never suggest that they were the root of conflict in anything approaching a majority of the narratives), and characters who ‘go berserk’ in the modern sense of it are certainly not encapsulated by this one, often-misused term.<sup>80</sup> Indeed, the only connection between *ójafnaðarmenn* and *berserkir* in the *Íslendingasögur* occurs in *Eyrbyggja saga*, where Víga-Styrr Þorgrímsson’s status as an *ójafnaðarmaðr* makes him the ideal person to take possession of, or mastery over, two Swedish *berserkir* (see 3.i.b). The quality of *ójafnaðr* is never directly ascribed to the *berserkir*; likewise, a cursory comparison of *ONP* and the sagas in which it locates *hávaðamenn* reveals no connection between *berserkir* and that particular quality of trouble-making.<sup>81</sup>

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of restraint despite her requests and Gunnarr’s decision to ignore Hrútr’s warning about the marriage — not to mention the malicious ‘advice’ of Skammkell regarding compensation for Hallgerðr’s theft. All of these instances do more to directly force instances of conflict (or to prevent reconciliation) than her own acts are shown doing by the saga, despite its determination to place blame on her; see also Miller, ‘Why is your Axe Bloody?’, pp. 304–7. This subtle undermining of the potency of her agency in the narrative might also be observed in her failed *hvøt* of Gunnarr: Jóhanna Katrín Friðríksdóttir, *Women in Old Norse Literature*, p. 21.

<sup>77</sup> Lönnroth, *Critical Introduction*, p. 64.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>79</sup> Cf. the aims of the website *TV Tropes*: ‘[t]ropes are devices and conventions that a writer can reasonably rely on as being present in the audience members’ minds and expectations. On the whole, tropes are not clichés. The word clichéd means “stereotyped and trite.” In other words, dull and uninteresting. We are not looking for dull and uninteresting entries. We are here to recognize tropes and play with them, not to make fun of them.’

<sup>80</sup> Dale, *Berserkir*, pp. 185, 343, section 6.3 *passim*.

<sup>81</sup> *ONP*, s.v. ‘há-vaða-maðr’.

*Hávaðamenn* and *ójafnaðarmenn* are representative of a type of ‘villain’ different from the *berserkr* in the *Íslendingasögur*. *Óðæll* is another word that Lönnroth highlights in the description of Sigmundr from *Njáls saga*, and one that I would associate with *hávaði* or *ójafnaðr* as opposed to, say, the description ‘skáld gott’ also highlighted by Lönnroth. Like *berserkr*, *skáld* is descriptive of a social role rather than a personality trait and the poets of the *Íslendingasögur* have long been recognised for their specific brand of quasi-Óðinic trouble-making.<sup>82</sup>

In general, the sagas themselves give us more useful categories than the mythological and legendary figures and stereotypes that Lönnroth draws on, often identifying the type of villain, trouble-maker or antagonist through their traits or a specific descriptive term. For example: the *skáld*, the *berserkr*, the *seiðmaðr* or *margkunnigt* individual (a practitioner of sorcery or witchcraft), or the person with no vocation or hobby associated with disruption, but a personality described as *ójafnaðr*, *hávaði*, *óðæll* or similar. There is no good reason to suppose that characters in the *Íslendingasögur* developed from a unified cultural understanding of the traits of figures who appear in a contemporary treatise on mythology such as *Snorra Edda*, or even from the surviving collection of poetry found in the Codex Regius.<sup>83</sup> It is not entirely clear to what extent Lönnroth means to imply this connection, but his insistence that such character types must be ‘traditional’, coupled with the mythological categories, makes one suspicious at the very least. Therefore, unless the saga itself makes explicit a connection to another medieval character,<sup>84</sup> I do not see the relevance of these mythological typologies.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> See, for example, *Skaldsagas*, ed. Poole; Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues with the Viking Age*, p. 145.

<sup>83</sup> GKS 2635 4to. Apart from the fact that Old Norse pre-Christian beliefs can hardly be referred to as a unified religion, we must wonder whether deities were ever thought of as impressions of humans in the way in which most other characters can be described (whether they are based on real individuals or otherwise; Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, p. 55). Mǫrðr Valgarðsson and Loki Laufeyjarson may both manifest the same narrative function (a trickster who is manoeuvred into providing the heroes with help), but that does not mean either that Snorri Sturluson’s synthesis of Loki’s ‘character’, or Loki as he appears in the poetry of the Codex Regius, provided the inspiration for Mǫrðr’s portrayal in *Njáls saga*.

<sup>84</sup> Like Gísli invites us to join him in comparing his sister Þórdís to Guðrún Gjúkadóttir; ÍF 6, 62.

<sup>85</sup> This is not to say that I disagree wholly with mythological *comparisons*, where narratives may have been partially inspired by native mythological material; rather it is the use of a specific typology based on the myths that I object to. Ranković discerned something of a middle ground between Lönnroth’s mythological types and the traditional referentiality of saga characterisation in her discussion of Grettir Ásmundarson (Ranković, ‘Grettir the Deep’, pp. 797–8). Nevertheless, her nuanced suggestions regarding the qualities Grettir might be seen to share with Þórr, Loki and Óðinn are distant from Lönnroth’s implication that all saga characters should necessarily fit into a particular type.

Functional descriptions offer more flexible, broad categories within the sagas. Encompassed in the role of ‘villain’, the particular type that I am interested in might be thought of as the ‘instigator’, *upphafsmaðr* (‘originator’) or *Veranlassung* (‘kindler’), equated with Andersson’s loosely defined ‘irritants’.<sup>86</sup> Several categories of functionalised character or ‘structural types’ have been recognised by David Galef in relation to minor characters: narrators and expositors; interruptors; symbols and allegories; enablers or agents of action; foils and contrasts; doubles or doppelgangers; and emphasisers.<sup>87</sup> Those who begin conflict in the *Íslendingasögur* might be associated with several of these categories and they are by no means universally minor characters; usually one expects a contrast with the nobler characters, a foil to those with whom we are meant to sympathise. As Gaskins observed, they tend to interrupt the quiet of the saga’s opening set-up; but perhaps the idea of ‘enablers or agents of action’ is the most useful concept to take from Galef.<sup>88</sup>

Another useful term descriptive of these characters’ function is ‘disruptive’, used by Woloch of Thersites, a minor character in the *Iliad*:

Thersites is perhaps the first truly minor character in Western literature. It is not simply that he has a subordinate narrative role, but that **his striking fictional identity emerges through, and revolves around, this subordinate position**. The collapse of authority signaled by Achilles’ withdrawal seems to produce this narrative intrusion, this disruptive character. **Thersites is so despicable because he refuses a delimited position**; while others are “orderly in their place,” even in the absence of Achilles, Thersites threatens to speak *endlessly* [...], to drag the assembly (and the epic itself) in toward his own endless self.<sup>89</sup>

This description of Thersites’ peculiar brand of disruptiveness is evocative of the non-supernatural (generally minor) characters in the *Íslendingasögur* that I am focussed on. The idea that Thersites does not know his place — in society or in the narrative — brings us back to the *ójafnaðarmaðr*. We have already seen how Andersson and Lönnroth generalised the role of this type of individual in the

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<sup>86</sup> Lönnroth, *Critical Introduction*, p. 76. ‘Irritant’ evokes the imagery of the ‘grit in the oyster’, although no doubt this is unintentional on Andersson’s part. Pearls, like good stories, cannot form without said irritants.

<sup>87</sup> Galef, *Supporting Cast*, pp. 15–20; see also Woloch, *The One vs. The Many*, pp. 340–1, nn. 2, 5.

<sup>88</sup> Galef, *Supporting Cast*, p. 18. As Galef makes clear, when a character becomes a combination of several of his categories, they are unlikely to fit the description of a minor character any longer; this may not apply to the *Íslendingasögur*, but it is a helpful distinction in many cases.

<sup>89</sup> Woloch, *The One vs. The Many*, p. 4. **Emphasis in bold** mine; *emphasis in Italics* the author’s own.

sagas; Byock, too, provides a number of passing summaries of these characters; ‘men unwilling to act with moderation’; ‘ruthless and overly ambitious’; ‘[unwilling] to settle matters through compromise or ... refusal to abide by an arbitrated agreement’.<sup>90</sup> The impression that these characters burst out of their social, reciprocal roles in a selfish rampage of disruptiveness tallies well with the impression Woloch gives of Thersites breaking free of social and narrational constraints. Byock nevertheless discusses few of these characters in detail, and those he does discuss tend not to be the ‘minor’ iterations of such characters; an *ójafnaðarmaðr* can be anything from a lowly horseman to a chieftain with somewhat kingly pretensions.<sup>91</sup>

It is similar in the case of Andersson’s study of the heroic ideal in Old Norse literature; he points out that these characters, even when they are wealthy chieftains from well-respected families, are never portrayed in an exemplary light by the sagas.<sup>92</sup> Yet he is mistaken in suggesting that a catalogue of the way in which sagas present their *ójafnaðarmenn* would simply be ‘overkill’.<sup>93</sup> Social and narrational disruption can take many forms, and this type of character deserves to be examined in more detail, especially since Miller recognised how fundamentally the quality of *ójafnaðr* goes against the social values presented by the *Íslendingasögur*.<sup>94</sup>

Characters defined through the quality of *ójafnaðr* are therefore emblematic of a certain kind of conflict in the sagas. They are nearly always human in the *Íslendingasögur*,<sup>95</sup> they do not adhere to their proper social role (whether they are a chieftain or otherwise, they display self-regard beyond their status) and they are guaranteed to cause an upset of one sort or another. Their lives usually end violently or they leave the saga as full outlaws.

I must confess an enduring reluctance to name *ójafnaðarmenn* as anything other than what they are termed by the sagas. Nevertheless, in the interests of communicability and in acknowledgement of the fact that *ódældarmenn*, *hávaðamenn* and others might be found to

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<sup>90</sup> Byock, *Feud*, pp. 29; 30; 110.

<sup>91</sup> Byock, *Feud*, pp. 30; 82; 146. Chieftain *ójafnaðarmenn* receive more attention in the sagas themselves; low-status characters are by definition nearly universally ‘minor’ characters in the *Íslendingasögur*.

<sup>92</sup> Andersson, ‘Displacement of the Heroic Ideal’, p. 580.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>94</sup> Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, pp. 301; 7; 277.

<sup>95</sup> Hallmundr in *Grettis saga* may be an exception, as is Þorkell Rauðfeldarson in *Bárðar saga*. Yet both examples are unusual: the latter is unique in being allowed a ‘quiet retirement’ from his initially troublesome personality (3.ii.b), and the former is accused of *ójafnaðr* by his own daughter and only then upon his death; her judgement of his actions helps to explain why she is willing to help his killer (4.ii). I do not view Þórólfr bægifótr’s afterlife in *Eyrbyggja saga* as relevant to his *ójafnaðr*.

function in a very similar manner to *ójafnaðarmenn*, the overarching type of character examined by this thesis will be termed narrative catalysts or triggers. Returning to Gaskins' vivid notion of a disturbed equilibrium it may be helpful to view this equilibrium as akin to a state of dynamic chemical equilibrium. In such a state there are 'forward' and 'backward' reactions that occur at the same rate, meaning that the end products of both reactions co-exist in stable proportions. Thus the 'equilibrium' from which the saga narratives emerge is the everyday interactions of gift-giving, alliance-forming, subsistence and politics. The narrative catalyst, like a catalyst used in a state of dynamic equilibrium, affects both the forward and backward reactions; i.e. both characters that we might think of as the 'protagonists' and those that we consider to be 'antagonists'. As is demonstrated across Part I, both good and bad comes from the introduction of an *ójafnaðarmaðr* to the *Íslendingasögur*; although unlike chemical catalysts, these characters cannot be said to emerge unchanged from the process. It remains an imperfect comparison, because characters, as an imitation of human life, do not conform to the strict balance of chemistry; these narrative catalysts might do more good than bad, or more bad than good, and they may ultimately redefine what constitutes the state of equilibrium.<sup>96</sup> Nevertheless, the importance of their role in the narrative will become clear in the course of my study.

By engaging in an examination of these characters, various aspects of the narrative of the *Íslendingasögur* will be addressed. Part I encompasses an in-depth examination of the function, placement, language and nuance of character introductions and a comparison of attitudes towards high and low status individuals across various *Íslendingasögur*. Part II turns to the distancing techniques employed by the sagas' narrative voice to subtly affect our impression of a character and the importance of public opinion and of the correct evaluation of social situations. A recurring question is the extent to which introductory passages affect our view of characters. By singling out *ójafnaðarmenn* as a starting point I am able to examine multiple texts and point to both similarities and differences in the overall portrayal of these particular narrative triggers.

Chapter 2 establishes the conventions and functions of the *ójafnaðarmaðr*'s introduction to the saga. The concerns of saga society are crystallised in the kind of information we are given about characters during their introduction; the form deftly manages audience expectations for the narrative to follow. In Chapter 3 I expand on this, describing and loosely grouping the *ójafnaðarmenn* from a total of fifteen texts according to their position in the wider narrative and comparing these examples to *Eyrbyggja saga*'s three *ójafnaðarmenn*. This highlights the narrative function of these characters and offers up questions regarding the development of the *ójafnaðarmaðr* as a kind of trope in saga literature, blurring modern definitions of genre and age.

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<sup>96</sup> Cf. Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, p. 297.

Part II explores in more depth pertinent issues raised by the cataloguing carried out in Part I. Chapter 4 concerns two sagas which do not have the kind of *ójafnaðarmaður* whose introductions are laid out in Part I. Þorleikr Hǫskuldsson is *engi jafnaðarmaður* — and this sentiment is ascribed to public opinion rather than expressed by the saga narrator directly. The reasons for such equivocation are examined in relation to other characters described as such, and Þorleikr's significant role in the tragedy of *Laxdæla saga* is traced. The role of fate in the saga obscures much of the human responsibility, and this will be considered in comparison with *Grettis saga* as a form of narrative rhetoric. These two sagas highlight the paradox by which fate simplifies narrative causation whilst creating a more complex portrait of humanity.

In Part I, I only include characters who are described by the saga on their first appearance as an *ójafnaðarmaður*. Hrafnkell Freysgoði's character portrait is separated from his first appearance by another chapter in the modern edition (ÍF 11), but he is one of the most enigmatic saga characters and an unusual example of an *ójafnaðarmaður* who survives his own narrative. In Chapter 5, the role of public opinion in forming and holding power is examined in depth in relation to *Hrafnkels saga*, building upon the case-study of *Eyrbyggja saga* in Chapter 3 and the presentation of the protagonists' characters in Chapter 4. Finally, I draw my conclusions together in Chapter 6, developing and reapplying some of Woloch's ideas on characterisation and structure, and questioning the effect of audience expectations regarding character and characterisation in the *Íslendingasögur*.

## 2: CHARACTER INTRODUCTION AND THE VOICE OF THE SAGA

In this chapter I present a summary of the conventions of character introduction in the *Íslendingasögur*. Although I focus on the eighteen individuals introduced as *ójafnaðarmenn*, the observations made regarding traditional and compositional influence on the sagas can be applied to any other character introduction in the sagas. In the context of the narrative trigger, however, character introductions are the first indication that the audience has of where narrative or social disruption will come from; these passages are where the sagas cock their narrative triggers.

Character introductions are short passages of description found throughout the narratives of all sagas. They are usually our first encounter with a named character and they lay out essential information regarding the most important aspects of saga society: kin, wealth and how a person might deal with others, for instance. The language is traditional and might even be called formulaic. It is these traditional conventions that allow us to read significance into what character introductions tell us about an individual. Structurally, character introductions point to what is to follow in the narrative. The details presented may at times leave a practiced reader in no surprise as to the events that follow, such is the power of these introductions to shape the way we imagine a character will go on to interact with others. They are a perfect combination of narrative functionality and the individual, presenting us with a neat, external summary of an entire life and acting as a signpost to the plot.

This chapter begins by outlining some specifics of my methodology in more detail. First (2.i.a) I explain how I arrived at the dataset discussed in this chapter, then following this I review previous scholarship on character introductions and explore the language that has been used to describe them or their constituent parts (2.i.b). Section 2.i ends with a thorough examination of the word *ójafnaðr*, its underlying semantic associations and its unique significance in the society depicted by the *Íslendingasögur* (2.i.c).

The following section and bulk of this chapter (2.ii) breaks down the introductory passages of *ójafnaðarmenn* in the *Íslendingasögur* into their constituent parts, examining the ways in which conventional information is deployed in subtle and deliberate ways in each introduction. I have identified several standard categories of information that may be found in most character introductions (to be explored as points 2.ii.b–e: kin and land, status, characteristics, deeds), and through the examination of examples from across the corpus of *Íslendingasögur* I proceed to demonstrate the range of allusive possibilities in these short passages. At 2.ii.d I provide a summary of semantically connected terms whose function may be shown by further study to have something in common with the *ójafnaðarmenn* primarily explored by this thesis. Finally, section 2.iii



summarises the patterns and trends that emerge in 2.ii, problematising the impact of these character introductions on medieval and modern audiences. This will lead into a detailed study of the positioning of these introductions in saga narrative, to be conducted in Chapter 3.

The examples discussed in this chapter come from a diverse range of narratives. My first objective was to identify all occurrences of the word *ójafnaðr* (or its compounds) in the *Íslendingasögur*. I then filtered the results down to include only examples used in character introductions and then only to character introductions in which the saga narrator is the one to assign these qualities to a character; i.e. that it is not that ‘people thought’ someone was an *ójafnaðarmaðr*, but that the narrator states it as fact. Whilst it may be argued that public opinion in the sagas is simply a transfer of the narrator’s own opinion, it is nevertheless a different, more ‘discreet’ rhetorical device.<sup>97</sup> It is a strong element in the apparent objectivity of the narrator’s voice and will therefore be studied briefly in Chapter 4, with reference back to the corpus of unambiguous introductions examined here. I arrived at the dataset through a thorough examination of digitised, searchable versions of the sagas (generally in modern Icelandic)<sup>98</sup> in close comparison with the Íslensk fornrit editions. The search was aided by use of the *ONP* database and Per Stokke’s MA thesis.<sup>99</sup>

The fifteen sagas in which introductions to *ójafnaðarmenn* are found are disparate by modern definitions of sub-genre and age. At the most fantastic end of the *Íslendingasögur* — and consequentially supposed to be one of the youngest sagas — is *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls*,<sup>100</sup> at the other end are sagas held to be at the classical high-point of the canon such as *Njáls saga*. The uniting feature of the fifteen texts is that they all contain *ójafnaðarmenn* introduced explicitly as such by the saga narrative. Introductory passages themselves are after all common to most genres of Old Norse prose narrative, but their exact format and conventions may differ subtly across texts, as will be demonstrated here. How these characters are utilised by the different sagas, where in the story they are introduced and whether this can help us to describe saga composition in more nuanced terms is investigated in Chapter 3 to complete the picture of this corpus developed across Part I.

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<sup>97</sup> Lönnroth, ‘Rhetorical Persuasion’, pp. 167–8.

<sup>98</sup> *Icelandic Saga Database; Snerpa*, ed. Sæmundur Bjarnason.

<sup>99</sup> Stokke, ‘Noen personbetegnelser’.

<sup>100</sup> Jóhannes Halldórsson, ‘Formáli’, p. lxxv.

## 2.i: Introducing characters

This aim of this chapter is to highlight variations and similarities in the ways in which a specific type of character can be introduced, with the intention of creating a clearer picture of what exactly the quality of *óðjafnaðr* meant to the medieval saga audience. For many years, the narrative voice of the saga was assumed to be thoroughly objective, whether due to decades of levelling through oral re-telling, or due to the noble intentions of an author who sought to remain impartial.<sup>101</sup> This assumption did not require a great deal of dismantling once the way in which the sagas describe their characters and depict their actions was scrutinised in any detail. Lönnroth undertook to do this in 1970, elegantly making the case for certain devices in the sagas to be read directly as ‘rhetorical persuasion’.<sup>102</sup> These include the way in which a person is introduced or the way they are described following their death by an often eulogistic ‘necrology’; how dialogue is portrayed in a scene; and whether we see characters engaged in relatable, everyday activities in and around the homestead.<sup>103</sup> From these observations, the saga’s most prominent rhetorical devices may be seen to frame a saga character’s life, affecting their introduction (at birth or coming-of-age), their interactions with others and the portrayal of their achievements, through to their final appearance (at, or just following, their death).<sup>104</sup>

Lönnroth’s observations on the information imparted by a character’s introduction have primary significance for Chapter 2, although I will return to his other criteria in the case-studies of Part II. Whilst elsewhere he has preferred to describe saga characters first and foremost as emblematic of ‘types’, Lönnroth’s work on the rhetoric of the sagas has shown how important human, individualising interpretation actually is to their narratives.<sup>105</sup> The rhetoric of the saga relies upon a history of interpretation of and interaction with the characters concerned; someone (it does not matter whether they were originally real or imagined) has been judged by a tradition of storytelling (hence by both storytellers and audience members) and that tradition of judgement has

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<sup>101</sup> Lönnroth, ‘Rhetorical Persuasion’, p. 157, n. 1 states: ‘The “objectivity” of the sagas is stressed in almost every survey of Old Norse literature.’ Examples include Hallberg, *The Icelandic Saga*, pp. 73; 79; Ker, *Epic and Romance*, p. 214–5.

<sup>102</sup> Lönnroth, ‘Rhetorical Persuasion’.

<sup>103</sup> Character introductions stand out as particularly strong evidence against an ‘objective’ saga narrator, as acknowledged by Einar Ól. Sveinsson slightly prior to Lönnroth’s article: Einar Ól. Sveinsson, ‘Íslendingasögur’, p. 508.

<sup>104</sup> Cf. O’Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, p. 42.

<sup>105</sup> See also: Bagge, *Society and Politics*, p. 61.

been distilled into the character portrait presented by the version of the saga that has been preserved.<sup>106</sup> The expression of this individual's character is performed in subjective terms designed to influence the next audience or reader's judgement; we are free to decide whether the saga's presentation of character is fair or whether we prefer to form an alternative judgement (in either case, also by necessity forming a judgement on the reliability, or bias, inherent in the saga's narrative voice; see Chapter 5).

Sverre Bagge took a similar approach to Lönnroth regarding the rhetoric of character introductions in 1991, although he isolated his study to introductions and dialogue (or, as he referred to them, 'summaries' and 'scenes') within a single compilation of *konungasögur* ('kings' sagas').<sup>107</sup> Bagge's study focussed on Norwegian royalty, a group distinct from those that I am studying, whose portrayal was found to be overwhelmingly positive even when they were not considered to be good rulers.<sup>108</sup> As with the specific nature of Bagge's study, it is also true that much of what Lönnroth observes to be relevant to his case-study, *Njáls saga*, may not be applicable to the rest of the genre.<sup>109</sup> Nevertheless, I intend to give an overview of the way in which different sagas vary the technique of introducing the same kind of character, going beyond the structuralist tradition of searching for overarching similarities between the sagas, and highlighting the value of differences between each saga.

Recent work by Slavica Ranković (2013) on traditional motifs in the sagas provides a productive backdrop for this comparative methodology.<sup>110</sup> By examining the 'formula' of the black-clothed killer in the *Íslendingasögur* she produced a comprehensive list of instances in which this motif was used in both expected and unexpected ways (for instance, whether the victim was the one in black, or whether the saga expressed awareness of the fact that there was a convention surrounding the use of black clothing). Whilst I remain to be convinced that the data collected can be used to form a chronology of the sagas concerned,<sup>111</sup> mapping out the variations on a theme that the sagas play upon may well offer insights into the compositional techniques behind these layered sources and the way in which motifs (or formulae) were treated by the culture that produced them.

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<sup>106</sup> See Ranković, 'Grettir the Deep'. Different audiences may have resulted in different characterisations of the same individual, depending upon local and genealogical preferences; see Gísli Sigurðsson, '*\*Immanent Saga of Guðmundr ríki*'.

<sup>107</sup> Bagge, *Society and Politics*, esp. pp. 61–2; 147–58.

<sup>108</sup> Bagge, *Society and Politics*, p. 157.

<sup>109</sup> For instance, its remarkable, powerful use of alliteration: Lönnroth, 'Rhetorical Persuasion', pp. 165–6.

<sup>110</sup> Ranković, 'Tinkering with Formulas'.

<sup>111</sup> Ranković herself also appears somewhat unconvinced; Ranković, 'Tinkering with Formulas', p. 151.

Following Ranković's loose use of the term 'formula' (long divorced from its metrical, solely oral origins),<sup>112</sup> it may be seen as fitting to refer to character introductions as formulae employed by the saga narrator, returning to Lönnroth's practice in the 1970s.<sup>113</sup> Yet whilst character introductions are undeniably an essential part of the narrative grammar of the sagas that can be deployed to signal a significant shift in the path of the story, terming the introduction as a whole unit a 'formula' implies more coherence and regularity in the form than is strictly accurate. Whilst there is a recognisable consistency to these passages (as in Lönnroth's paradigm, 'a man was called X, the son of Y, the son of Z; he lived at farm X; he was wise and well-liked'),<sup>114</sup> as I will demonstrate, the sagas vary the level of information provided to an extensive degree. In addition, character introductions can only function within the context of what must necessarily follow them — sooner, or later — in the narrative. It is far more appropriate to consider the language that makes up a character introduction as a set of formulae, or as derived from a 'stock of semantically charged formulaic phrases',<sup>115</sup> as the elements that make up the introduction can be rearranged or expanded upon in order to change the emphasis of the passage.

In addition many character introductions can be seen to embody a broad range of narrative possibilities. This is unlike comparatively contourless (to a modern audience at least) genealogical information, such as that which more commonly comes at the close of a saga, or partially characterises the tonal difference between *Íslendingasögur* and *Sturlungasögur* ('sagas of the Sturlungs/contemporary sagas').<sup>116</sup> To take an extreme stance, even lists of patronymics may be termed 'narrative' as they tell a chronological story of various lives,<sup>117</sup> but introductory passages contextualise a life to a greater extent and often associate a character with a broader variety of inferred events than a simple genealogy is able to do.<sup>118</sup> For example, the description of Eysteinn

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<sup>112</sup> See Ranković, 'Tinkering with Formulas', p. 124, n. 6.

<sup>113</sup> Lönnroth, *Critical Introduction*, p. 45.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>115</sup> Ranković, 'Grettir the Deep', p. 795.

<sup>116</sup> Sagas, especially those referred to as 'regional sagas', often end with lists of the famous descendants of their protagonists. One of the most extensive examples is found at the close of *Eyrbyggja saga*, which details the farms and marriages of nearly all of Snorri goði's nineteen legitimate children, as well as tracing the most famous lines to groups such as the Ásbirningar and Sturlungar: ÍF 4, 181–3. An extreme example of the genealogical emphasis of the *Sturlungasögur* can be found in the opening chapters of *Hvamm-Sturlu saga*: SS 1, 61–5.

<sup>117</sup> Cf. Abbott, *Introduction to Narrative*, p. 4.

<sup>118</sup> Abbott, *Introduction to Narrative*, p. 13. Abbott self-confessedly takes a loose definition of narrative by including passages that contain only a single event (as opposed to passages where 'nothing happens'); yet it is

Mánason, the *ójafnaðarmaðr* from *Reykðæla saga*, refers to him as ‘rómlendr at kyni’ (‘of Roman stock’), which sets even a modern audience imagining a variety of narratives into which this tantalising detail could be slotted.<sup>119</sup>

In terms of formulaic details found in character introductions, they usually contain genealogical information (and the information on land and farms that is commonly transmitted alongside genealogical material), but they are complemented by additional features: often a reference to a character’s strength or appearance, perhaps mention of their occupation or a more detailed description of their physical appearance, and usually at least one word to describe their personality. It is the descriptions of personality in particular that Lönnroth’s rhetorical study focussed on — ‘especially when used together with other types of information, references to such characteristics may be quite effective on a more or less subconscious level’.<sup>120</sup> This is where we find the term *ójafnaðarmaðr*. In light of our expectations for these narrative catalysts (for instance, that action will ensue from their entrance into the story) their introductions ought to be seen as a charged part of the narrative: an alert that lying buried within the rich genealogical information there lurk characters whose role is specifically to encourage conflict. Before exploring the conventions of these passages further it is necessary to more fully define the characters under scrutiny.

### 2.i.a: What is an *ójafnaðarmaðr*?

As discussed in Chapter 1, the word *ójafnaðarmaðr* is often used by scholars as though it were a coherent character type, although the broad range of individuals described as such has never before been studied in detail. It is therefore important to establish what significance the term had in Old Norse, in order to discern whether these characters can indeed be thought of as a single, unique type, or whether this is one of a number of interchangeable terms for characters who spur on action

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not clear how explicit the event needs to be in order to meet his criteria. Can we infer births, marriages and deaths as events inherent in a list of descendants? The connections that an audience with detailed knowledge of oral traditions could make upon hearing a genealogy are surely not so different from the human impulse to see narrative in static paintings (Abbott, *Introduction to Narrative*, pp. 7–10); cf. Ranković, ‘Grettir the Deep’, p. 793. Abbott’s definition of narrative may not be entirely applicable to orally derived material such as that under discussion.

<sup>119</sup> ÍF 10, 152–3.

<sup>120</sup> Lönnroth, ‘Rhetorical Persuasion’, p. 167.

in the narrative. Or indeed, whether there is some truth in both of these possibilities; perhaps this is a type of character whose particular brand of narrative disruption singles him out from other disruptive figures. Thus this section explores the semantics of the term *ójafnaðarmaðr*, observing the language associated with these characters and considering the significance of the underlying notion of *jafnaðr* ('equitability') to the sagas as a whole.

The term *ójafnaðarmaðr* is rendered in a variety of ways in the most recent collection of English translations: trouble-maker; overbearing; difficult man; unfair; unjust man.<sup>121</sup> 'Trouble-maker' captures the semantics explored here, for as narrative catalysts they can be expected to literally 'make trouble'; that they may be unjust, difficult, unfair and overbearing is also not to be argued against. However, the variety of translations used across volumes that aimed for a degree of agreement and consistency in many words or terms specific to sagas and their society is curious when we remember how confidently Andersson, Byock and others have referred to *ójafnaðarmenn* as a delineated, coherent type. Another memorable attempt to describe these characters is Miller's translation of the term as 'man of no measure'.<sup>122</sup> This partly captures the nature of the *ójafnaðarmaðr*, although I would argue that the sense is too positive to be applied to individuals who usually act against the heroes or protagonists of the saga, and who disregard social conventions and laws.

*Ójafnaðr* is the negative form of the word *jafnaðr*, and it is important to note that there are no '*jafnaðarmenn*' in the sagas; therefore, perhaps in examining the opposite of the *ójafnaðarmaðr* we will better be able to define them. In his 1964 study of legal vocabulary, Klaus von See emphasised the connection between *jafnaðr* and justice in the sagas, although he suggested that it referred specifically to legal settlement in earlier usage.<sup>123</sup> Whilst the semantics of *jafnaðr* can encompass the concept of justice (or justness), it does not define all uses of the term, and the idea of a 'just' or 'unjust man' raises questions regarding the sagas' and their audience's definition of 'justice' which cannot easily be answered. Indeed, it seems that *jafnaðr* was not even the most common word used to describe the medieval Icelandic concept of justice; for instance, one of the sagas that is most concerned with justice and the perversion of justice, *Bandamanna saga*, makes prolific use in its narrative of the words *rangr* ('unjust', MnE cognate 'wrong') and *réttr* ('just', MnE

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<sup>121</sup> Viðar Hreinsson, gen. ed., *Complete Sagas of Icelanders*. Examples of each translation can be found in: *Bárðar saga* (III, 239), *Fóstbræðra saga* (III, 374), *Grettis saga* (III, 128), *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls* (II, 421), *Hávarðar saga* (V, 313).

<sup>122</sup> Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, p. 67.

<sup>123</sup> von See, *Altnordische Rechtswörter*, p. 246.

cognate ‘right’). There is only a single instance of *ójafnaðr* in *Bandamanna saga*, and that is when the double-crossing chieftain Egill Skúlaason is described ironically by his new ally, Ófeigr.<sup>124</sup>

*Ójafnaðarmaðr* literally means ‘uneven man’ and it is rooted in the word *jafn* (MnE cognate ‘even’); but whilst the semantics again point to imbalance, such a literal translation does not help us to make sense of these characters when they are divorced from their original context. Miller has drawn attention to the importance and ambiguities of the terms *jafn* and *jafnaðr* in saga society, observing the significance of the *mannjafnaðr* (‘equalling of men’) in both of its forms.<sup>125</sup> The most common procedure termed *mannjafnaðr* is the equalling of corpses and crimes during a settlement, where in theory one dead body is equal to another. In other scenarios, however, the term describes the pitting of two leaders or prosperous men against one another; usually it is their followers and supporters who will weigh up the achievements of one against the other with the explicit intention being that the outcome will *not* be equal, but one man will be shown to be better. Of course, this is frequently the case with settlements based upon a *mannjafnaðr*, in that one person’s corpse can indeed be deemed worth more than another person’s corpse.<sup>126</sup> Relating to the *ójafnaðarmaðr*, Miller’s comments are worth considering in full:

If one aspect of the *mannjafnaðr*’s balancing was the very form of the cultural values of reconciliation and peace—the image of social measure—the other aspect was the quintessence of the competition for scarce honor—the image of strife and discord. The first aspect suffused the concept of the *ójafnaðarmaðr* with its moral negativity: he was the ‘uneven’, unbalanced, or unjust man, the man who refused to be bound by the rules of balance and equivalence in the disputing process.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>124</sup> ÍF 7, 322–4; 349–50 (Möðruvallabók version). *Hávarðar saga* makes an equivalent number of references to the *ójafnaðr* of Þorbjörn Þjóðreksson, but it is far less concerned with the assembly-based wrangling with words that dominates *Bandamanna saga*; in context I would argue therefore that *réttr* and *jafnaðr* (and their antonyms) are not interchangeable terms. The two are distinguished by von See by their connection to the law: he views *jafnaðr* as a legal term and *réttr* as related to the extra-legal concept of a person’s ‘right’ to something. This distinction appears tenuous in the examples studied throughout this thesis; von See, *Altnordische Rechtswörter*, p. 32.

<sup>125</sup> Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, pp. 301–2.

<sup>126</sup> Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, p. 277.

<sup>127</sup> Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, p. 301.

This quotation positions these narrative catalysts firmly against the values held most dearly by saga society. Like Woloch's analysis of Thersites, it suggests that *ójafnaðarmenn* fight against the impositions of others, of society and of the narrative itself: they 'refuse to be bound'.<sup>128</sup> If peace can be equated with balance, they throw the story and the society within it out of balance, making it essential for those around them to respond in order to restore a sense of balance through equalisation and reconciliation.

In other social contexts balance was equally important: a good marriage in the sagas is termed *jafnræði* ('an equal match'),<sup>129</sup> and the reciprocity and equivalence implied by such a term is an ideal that can be found throughout the sagas and various interactions therein.<sup>130</sup> The sense of evenness represented by *jafn* might even be seen in its adverbial form, *jafnan*.<sup>131</sup> This common word, meaning 'always', presents the endurance of balance, implying that the disruption caused by something that is *ójafn* or *ójafnaðr* will only upset things temporarily; evenness is the default state.

The observation that there are no *jafnaðarmenn* in the *Íslendingasögur* is significant in this light; the individuals described are *ekki* or *engi jafnaðarmaðr* whenever the word appears without a negativising prefix. Whilst Stokke argued that the *jafnaðarmaðr* was absent from the sagas because being such would entail a consideration for others incompatible with the heroic ethos, I think that their absence has a different significance in light of Miller's work on the balanced-exchange model.<sup>132</sup> There are no *jafnaðarmenn* because being *jafnaðr* was the social default. It would be almost meaningless to say that someone conformed to the everyday expected values of reciprocity and proportional response, whereas to label someone *ójafnaðarmaðr* was to issue a grave warning about one who did not act appropriately or predictably in social interactions.

When a saga introduces an *ójafnaðarmaðr* during the establishment of its literary 'equilibrium', or balanced peace, we expect certain things. These are summed up in many scholars' casual references to the *ójafnaðarmaðr* as a type: he is the kind of character whose violent death

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<sup>128</sup> 1.iv, p. 20.

<sup>129</sup> Miller, 'Why is your Axe Bloody?', p. 40. See: Hrútr's assessment of Gunnarr's proposal to Hallgerðr in *Njáls saga*, ÍF 12, 86; Glúmr's fears of offering an *ójafnaðr* marriage proposal in *Víga-Glúms saga*, ÍF 9, 37.

<sup>130</sup> Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, pp. 7, 87.

<sup>131</sup> There is no opposite form of this word in which *\*ójafnan* represents the concept of 'never', 'not always' or similar.

<sup>132</sup> Stokke, 'Noen personbetegnelser', p. 24; Stokke's dissertation predates Andersson's deconstruction of the heroic ethos in the sagas: Andersson 'Displacement of the Heroic Ideal'.



has no repercussions,<sup>133</sup> he is ‘always harshly judged’<sup>134</sup> and he relies on his individual (often martial) strength.<sup>135</sup> Whilst these assumptions cannot be said to account for every example of these individuals throughout the *Íslendingasögur*, they do paint a broadly accurate picture of the majority. Essentially, we expect trouble from a character described as such, and we expect the trouble that they initiate to backfire on them and result in their punishment: usually a violent death or full outlawry (though, of course, there are exceptions to this as well).

Whether or not this is unique to *ójafnaðarmenn* may be a matter of debate. There are other descriptions and characteristics that are commonly translated in a similar manner, although they differ in the nuances of their meanings. Some of these have been acknowledged in the introduction above (*hávaðamaðr*, *ódældarmaðr*),<sup>136</sup> but there are many other examples in the sagas of warning words used in the introductions of troublesome or disruptive individuals. Crucially, these types of word are not always found alone, which implies some distinction on the part of the saga’s composer; someone can be both *ójafnaðarmaðr* and *hávaðamaðr* and possess other qualities besides.<sup>137</sup> The most common place in which to find a grouping of qualities of this sort is in a character’s introduction.

These other qualities are given more attention in Part II of this thesis. For now I shall proceed to an overview of the introduction of *ójafnaðarmenn* in the *Íslendingasögur*. The other negative qualities that appear in these descriptions are collected as part of this overview at 2.ii.d. Following an analysis of the vagaries of character introductions the placement of these passages in the wider saga narrative is explored, with an assessment of their function within the plot itself.

## 2.ii: Introducing *ójafnaðarmenn*: conventions and trajectories

The eighteen character introductions examined in this section all unequivocally ascribe the quality of *ójafnaðr* to the character in question. Whilst not all examples specifically use the term *ójafnaðarmaðr*, if the narrative offers a similar turn of phrase, for instance *fullr ójafnaðar* or *ójafnaðarfullr*, then I have counted that character amongst the *ójafnaðarmenn*. None of these

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<sup>133</sup> Byock, *Medieval Iceland*, p. 128.

<sup>134</sup> Andersson, ‘Displacement of the Heroic Ideal’, p. 580.

<sup>135</sup> Meulengracht Sørensen, *Fortælling og ære*, p. 197.

<sup>136</sup> 1.iv, pp. 18–9.

<sup>137</sup> For example: Vigfúss Víga-Glúmsson and Bárðr Hallason in *Víga-Glúms saga* (ÍF 9, 56–8); Þorgrímr trolli Einarsson’s relatives in *Fóstbræðra saga* (ÍF 7, 224–5).

introductions includes the more ambiguous phrasing whereby the trait is not directly ascribed to the character by the narrator themselves. Examples that demonstrate equivocation on the saga's part ('þótti monnum' or 'hann var engi jafnaðarmaður') are considered in more detail in Chapters 3 and 4.

The only other notable omission from this group of introductions is 'Narfi' from Jón Ólafsson's recollection of the first half of *Heiðarvíga saga*.<sup>138</sup> It seems highly probable that this character (called Lygi-Torfi in the surviving medieval portion of the manuscript) was indeed a candidate for the description *ójafnaðarmaður* (he is apparently a womaniser and willing to betray his own relatives); however, it is not appropriate to use Jón Ólafsson's manuscript for a close analysis of lexical usage. Unlike sagas preserved whole in late manuscripts, Jón's *Inntak* is not a direct copy of a medieval text and the material concerning Narfi/Torfi has been shown to be riddled with numerical errors and misnomers.<sup>139</sup> The eighteen examples we are left with come from a total of fifteen different *Íslendingasögur*. Sagas with multiple introductions of *ójafnaðarmenn* are: *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Víga-Glúms saga*.

## 2.ii.a Introducing ójafnaðarmenn

1. ***Bárðar saga*, ch. 2:** Mjöll giptist aptr Rauðfeld inum sterka, syni Svaða jötuns norðan frá Dofrum. Þau áttu þann son, er Þorkell hét; hann var mikill ok sterkr; hann var svartr á hár ok hörund, en þegar hann hafði aldr til, varð hann inn mesti ójafnaðarmaður.<sup>140</sup>
2. ***Eyrbyggja saga* (1), ch. 8:** Geirríði hafði átta Björn, sonr Bqlverks blindingatríónu, ok hét þeira sonr Þórólfr; hann var víkingr mikill. Hann kom út nokkuru síðar en móðir hans ok var með henni inn fyrsta vetr. Þórólfi þótti þat lítit búland ok skoraði á Úlfar kappa til landa ok bauð honum hólmgöngu, því at hann var við aldr ok barnlauss. Úlfarr vildi heldr deyja en vera kúgaðr af Þórólfi; þeir gengu á hólmi í Álptafirði ok fell Úlfarr, en Þórólfr varð sárr á fœti ok gekk jafnan haltr síðan; af þessu var hann kallaðr bægifótr. Hann gerði bú í Hvammi í

<sup>138</sup> For the preservation of this saga see Bjarni Einarsson, 'Introduction'. Jón was Árni Magnússon's copyist in Copenhagen and copied the first half of the medieval text of *Heiðarvíga saga* before both manuscript and copy were lost to the 1728 fire. In the following years Jón wrote out his recollection of this part of the saga; his account is of great value even if it is not precise on all details: Bjarni Guðnason, *Tulkún Heiðarvígasögu*, p. 43.

<sup>139</sup> Sigurður Nordal, 'Formáli', ÍF 3, p. cxii.

<sup>140</sup> ÍF 13, 105–6: 'Mjöll was married to Rauðfeldr the strong, the son of the giant Svaði from Dofri. They had a son, who was called Þorkell; he was big and strong; he had black hair and a matching complexion, and when he came of age, he became the most inequitable of men.'

Þórsárdal. Hann tók lönð eptir Úlfar ok var inn mesti ójafnaðarmaður. Hann seldi lönð leysingjum Þorbrands í Álptafirði, Úlfari Úlfarsfell, en Ørlygi Ørlygsstaði, ok bjuggu þeir þar lengi síðan.<sup>141</sup>

3. **Eyrbyggja saga (2), ch. 12:** Þorgrímr Kjallaksson bjó í Bjarnarhöfn, sem fyrr var sagt, ok áttu þau Þórhildr þrjá sonu: Brandr var ellstr, hann bjó í Krossnesi við Brimlárhöfða. Annarr var Arngrímr; hann var mikill maður ok sterkr, nefmikill, stórbeinóttir í andliti, rauðbleikr á hár ok vikóttir snimma, skolbrúnn, eygðr mjök ok vel; hann var ofstopamaður mikill ok fullr ójafnaðar, ok fyrir því var hann Styrr kallaður. Vermundr hét inn yngsti sonr Þorgríms Kjallakssonar; hann var hár maður, mjór ok fríður sýnum; hann var kallaður Vermundr inn mjóvi.<sup>142</sup>
4. **Eyrbyggja saga (3), ch. 57:** En er Snorri goði hafði fá vetr búit í Sælingsdalstungu, þá bjó sá maður á Eyri í Bitru norður, er Óspakr hét. Hann var sonr Kjallaks frá Kjallaksá af Skriðinsenni. Óspakr var kvángaðr maður; hann átti son þann, er Glúmr hét ok var ungr í þann tíma. Óspakr var manna mestr ok sterkastr; hann var óþokkasæll ok inn mesti ójafnaðarmaður; hann hafði með sér karla sjau eða átta, ok váru þeir mjök sakgæfir við menn þar norður; höfðu þeir jafnan skip fyrir landi ok tóku af hvers manns eigu eða rekum, það er þeim sýndisk.<sup>143</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> ÍF 4, 13–14: ‘Geirríður had married Björn, the son of Þólverkr blindingatrjóna, and their son was called Þórólfr; he was a great viking. He travelled out [to Iceland] some time later than his mother and was with her the first winter. Þórólfr thought it was poor farmland and demanded the land of Úlfarr kappi and challenged him to a duel. Because he was old and childless, Úlfarr preferred to die rather than be bullied by Þórólfr; they duelled at Álfafjörður and Úlfarr fell, but Þórólfr was wounded in the foot and went about afterwards with a limp; because of this he was called bægifótr. He set up a farm at Hvammur in Þórsárdalur. He took Úlfarr’s land and was the most inequitable of men. He sold the leaseholds to Þorbrandr in Álfafjörður, Úlfarr at Úlfarsfell and Ørlygr at Ørlygsstaðir; and they lived like this for a long time.’

<sup>142</sup> ÍF 4, 21: ‘Þorgrímr Kjallaksson lived at Bjarnarhöfn, as was said before, and he and Þórhildr had three sons: Brandr was the oldest, he lived in Krossnes by Brimlárhöfði. The second was Arngrímr; he was a big man and strong; had a large nose and broad face, red-blonde hair that was receding early, heavy brows [and] large, handsome eyes; he was an over-bearing man and wholly inequitable, and because of this he was called Styrr. Vermundr was the name of the youngest son of Þorgrímr Kjallaksson; he was a tall man, slender and fair in appearance; he was called Vermundr inn mjóvi.’

<sup>143</sup> ÍF 4, 157: ‘But when Snorri had lived for a few years in Sælingsdalstunga, then there lived a man at Eyrr, north in Bitra, who was called Óspakr. He was the son of Kjallakr from Kjallaksá of Skriðinsenni. Óspakr was a married man; he had a son from this marriage, who was called Glúmr and was young at the time. Óspakr was the biggest and strongest of men; he was not held in good favour and was the most inequitable of men; he had seven or eight men with him and they were very contentious amongst the people of the north; they also had a ship for going to land and they took from each man’s possessions or drift-rights whatever was available.’

5. ***Fljótsdæla saga, ch. 1:*** Oddr hét maðr. Hann hafði þar land numit. Bæði var hann blindr ok gamall í þann tíð. Hann átti son einn er Ölviðr hét. Hann tók fjárforráð eptir föður sinn. Ölviðr var mikill maðr vexti, allra manna málgastr, ósvinnr ok óvinsæll, heimskr ok illgjarn ok í öllu ójafnaðarmaðr. Hann var atdráttarmaðr mikill at búinu bæði af fjörðum neðan ok af fjöllum ofan.<sup>144</sup>
6. ***Fóstbræðra saga, ch. 3:*** Ingólfr hét maðr, er bjó í Jökulsfjörðum; hann var kallaðr Ingólfr sviðinn; sá boer var kallaðr á Sviðinsstaðum, er hann bjó á. Þorbrandr hét sonr hans; hann var garpr mikill ok ódæll ok óvinsæll. Þeir feðgar báðir váru ójafnaðarmenn miklir, tóku jafnan annarra manna fé með kúgan eða ránum. Þeir váru báðir þingmenn Vermundar, ok hélt hann mjök hendi yfir þeim, því at þeir gáfu honum jafnan góðar gjafar; ok var þeim því eigi skjótt hefndr sinn ofsi, sá er þeir höfðu við marga menn, at eiðr Vermundar stóð fyrir þeim.<sup>145</sup>
7. ***Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfjfls, ch. 1:*** Þorgrímr hét maðr; hann bjó þar, sem nú heitir á Hörgslandi. Hann var kvóngaðr maðr og átti tvó sonu við sinni konu; hét annar Grímr, en annar Jökull. Þeir voru ódælir og uppvöðslumiklir og ójafnaðarmenn inir mestu um allt það, er þeir máttu. Helga hét systir þeira, en dóttir Þorgríms. Hun var væn kona og kurteis, svo að eigi þótti þar í sveitum betri kvenkostr. Þorgrímr hafði goðorð í millum Jökulsár og Lómagnúps. Hann fór illa með sínu goðorði. Hann tók upp góz fyrir bændum, bæði yxn og hesta. Varð hann af þessu öllu saman mjög óvinsæll.<sup>146</sup>

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<sup>144</sup> ÍF 11, 216: 'Oddr was the name of a man. He had taken land there. He was both blind and old in that time. He had one son who was called Ölviðr. He took over the management of goods after his father. Ölviðr was grown into a large man, of all people the most malicious in speech, unwise and unpopular, foolish and ill-willed, and in all things an inequitable man. He was very good at providing for the farm, both from the fjords below and from the mountains above.'

<sup>145</sup> ÍF 7, 133–4: 'Ingólfr was the name of a man who lived in Jökulsfjörður; he was called Ingólfr sviðinn; the farm where he lived was called Sviðinsstaðir. Þorbrandr was the name of his son, he was very bold and overbearing and unpopular. The kinsmen were both very inequitable men [and] always took the goods of other men with threats or force. They were both *þingmenn* of Vermundr, and he was protective of them, because they always gave him good gifts; and the high-handedness that they had shown many men was therefore not quick to be avenged, because the oath of Vermundr covered them.'

<sup>146</sup> ÍF 14, 343: 'Þorgrímr was the name of a man; he lived at the place that is now called Hörgsland. He was a married man and had two sons with his wife; one was called Grímr, and one, Jökull. They were overbearing and aggressively ambitious and the most inequitable of men in their might. Helga was the name of their sister, the daughter of Þorgrímr. She was a promising woman and courteous so that there was not thought to be a more eligible woman in the land. Þorgrímr had a chieftaincy between Jökulsá and Lómagnúpur. He abused his

8. **Harðar saga, ch. 24:** Refr hét maður Þorsteinsson, Sölmundarsonar, Þórólfs sonar smjör. Hann bjó á Stykkisvelli í Brynjudal; hann var goðorðsmaður ríkr ok garpr mikill. Hann var kallaður síðar meir Refr inn gamli. Þorbjörg katla hét móðir hans; hon bjó í Hrísum; hon var fjölkunnig mjök ok in mesta galdrakona. Kjartan hét bróðir Refs; hann bjó á Þorbrandsstöðum, mikill maður ok sterkr ok illa skapi farinn, ójafnaðarmaður um alla hluti; því var hann furðu óvinsæll af alþýðu manna.<sup>147</sup>
9. **Hávarðar saga, ch. 1:** Það er upphaf þessarar sögu, at Þorbjörn hét maður; hann var Þjóðreksson. Hann bjó í Ísafirði á þeim bæ, er heitir at Laugabóli; hann hafði goðorð um Ísafjörð. Hann var stórættaður maður ok höfðingi mikill ok inn mesti ójafnaðarmaður, svá at engir menn þar um Ísafjörð báru styrk til neitt í móti honum at mæla. Hann tók dætr manna eða frændkonur ok hafði við hönd sér nokkura stund ok sendi síðan heim; fyrir sumum tók hann bú upp eða rak brott af eignum sínum.<sup>148</sup>
10. **Króka-Refs saga, ch. 1:** Maður er nefndr Þorbjörn, auðigr ok ódæll ok vígamaður mikill ok inn mesti ójafnaðarmaður. Hann hafði búit í öllum landsfjórðungum. Höfðingjar ok öll alþýða höfðu þenna mann brutt gervan, hver ór sínum landsfjórðungi, fyrir sakir ójafnaðar ok vígaferlis. Öngan mann hafði hann fé bættan. Rannveig hét kona hans; hon var heimsk ok harðráð, ok þat var kallat, at Þorbjörn mundi hafa unnit nökkurum óhöppum færra, ef hon hefði hann eigi fram æstan. Þorbjörn hafði nú keypt land þat, er at Sauðafelli heitir. Margir menn kvíddu mjök við kvámu hans, þeir er áður höfðu spurt til Þorbjarnar.<sup>149</sup>

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position as a chieftain. He took goods from the farmers, both cows and horses. Because of all this he became very unpopular.'

<sup>147</sup> ÍF 13, 63: 'Refr was a man, the son of Þorsteinn, the son of Sölmundr, the son of Þórólfr smjör. He lived at Stykkisvöllur in Brynjudalur; he was a powerful chieftain and very bold. He was later referred to more often as Refr inn gamli. Þorbjörg katla was the name of his mother; she lived at Hrísar; she was a great sorceress and proficient in witchcraft. Kjartan was the name of Refr's brother; he lived at Þorbrandsstaðir, [he was] a big man and strong, and inclined to be ill-willed; a very inequitable man in everything. Therefore he was found to be unpopular amongst people in general.'

<sup>148</sup> ÍF 6, 291: 'It is the beginning of this saga, that Þorbjörn was the name of a man; he was the son of Þjóðrekr. He lived in Ísafjörður, at the farm that is called Laugaból; he had a chieftaincy over Ísafjörður. He was a well-connected man and a great ruler and the most inequitable of men, so that no man there in Ísafjörður had the strength to go against him in disputes. He took people's daughters and female relatives and kept them close at hand for a little while before sending them home later. He took the possessions of some and drove others away from their farms.'

<sup>149</sup> ÍF 14, 119–20: 'A man is named Þorbjörn, wealthy and overbearing and a great fighter and the most inequitable of men. He had lived in all quarters of the land. Chieftains and ordinary people had driven this man

11. **Ljósvetninga saga, ch. 1:** Þeir bræðr, Sölmundr ok Söxólf, bjuggu at Gnúpum, Víðarssynir, garpar miklir ok ójafnaðarmenn, ok bjuggu fyrir austan í dalnum ok vǫru óeirðarmenn miklir um kvennafar ok málaferli ok hǫfðu því mikinn yfiringang, at fáir treystust at ganga í mót þeira vilja. Ærit vǫru þeir frægir, ok þó at illu. Sölmundr var fyrir þeim. Hann venr kvámur sínar til Qlvis at hitta dóttur hans, ok í mót vilja frænda hennar; ok fekksk þó engi forstaða af lítilmennsku föður hennar.<sup>150</sup>
12. **Njáls saga, ch. 58:** Egill hét maðr; hann var Kolsson, Óttars sonar ballar, er land numit meðal Stotalækjar ok Reyðarvatns. Bróðir Egils var Qnundr í Tröllaskógi, faðir Halla ins sterka, er var at vígi Hólta-Þóris með sonum Ketils hins sléttmála. Egill bjó í Sandgili. Synir hans vǫru þeir Kolr ok Óttarr ok Haukr; móðir þeira var Steinvör, systir Starkaðar. Synir Egils vǫru miklir menn ok kappsamir ok inir mestu ójafnaðarmenn; þeir vǫru at einu máli ok synir Starkaðar. Systir þeira var Guðrún náttól ok var kvenna fríðust ok kurteisust.<sup>151</sup>
13. **Reykdaela saga, ch. 1:** Eysteinn hét maðr. Hann var Mánason ok rómlendr at kyni. Hann bjó í Rauðaskriðum við Fljótsheiði. Hann var ójafnaðarmaðr mikill.<sup>152</sup>
14. **Þórðar saga hreðu, ch. 5:** Þetta sama sumar kom skip í Blönduós í Langadal. Þar kom út Ormr, systurson Skeggja ok bróðir Ásbjarnar. En er Skeggi frétti útkvámu frænda síns riðr

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away from each of their districts because of his inequitable behaviour and killings. No man had ever received compensation from him. Rannveig was the name of his wife; she was foolish and domineering, and it was said that Þorbjörn would have committed fewer unfortunate deeds if she had not urged him onwards. Þorbjörn had now bought the land that is called Sauðafell. Many men who had already heard of Þorbjörn felt apprehensive about his arrival.'

<sup>150</sup> ÍF 10, 3–4: 'The brothers Sölmundr and Söxólf, sons of Víðarr, lived at Gnúpur. [They were] very bold and inequitable men, and lived out east in the valleys and were overbearing men in their pursuit of women and other dealings, and therefore they were so domineering that few dared to go against their will. Their tempers were notorious. Sölmundr was their leader; he was accustomed to arriving at Qlvir's place to meet his daughter against the will of her kinsmen; and yet she received no protection from her father's inadequate response.'

<sup>151</sup> ÍF 12, 147: 'Egill was the name of a man, he was the son of Kolr, the son of Óttarr ballar, who claimed land between Stotalækur and Reyðarvatn. Egill's brother was Qnundr at Tröllaskógur, the father of Halli inn sterki, who was at the death of Hólta-Þórir with the sons of Ketill inn sléttmáli. Egill lived at Sandgil. His sons were Kolr and Óttarr and Haukr; their mother was Steinvör, the sister of Starkaðr. The Egilssynir were large men and impetuous and the most inequitable of men; they were of the same disposition as the Starkaðarsynir. Their sister was Guðrún náttól and she was the fairest and most courteous of women.'

<sup>152</sup> ÍF 10, 152–3: 'Eysteinn was the name of a man. He was the son of Máni and was Roman by descent. He lived in Rauðaskriða by Fljótsheiðr. He was a very inequitable man.'

hann til skips ok býðr Ormi heim með sér til vetrvistar, ok fór Ormr heim [með honum]. Ormr var svá háttaðr, at hann var hverjum manni meiri ok sterkari, rammr at afli ok inn vaskligasti ok fullr af ofrkappi ok þótti engi sinn jafningi. Hann var inn mesti vígamaðr ok fullr upp ójafnaðar.<sup>153</sup>

15. ***Þorsteins þáttur stangarhöggs, no chapters; early in narrative:*** Þórðr er maðr nefndr. Hann var húskarl Bjarna frá Hofi. Hann varðveitti reiðhesta Bjarna, því at hann var kallaðr hrossamaðr. Þórðr var ójafnaðarmaðr mikill, ok lét hann marga þess ok kenna, er hann var ríkismanns húskarl. En eigi var hann sjálf at meira verðr, ok eigi varð hann at vinsælli.<sup>154</sup>

16. ***Vatnsdæla saga, ch. 16:*** Þórólfr hét maðr ok var kallaðr heljarskinn; hann nam land í Forsæludal; hann var ójafnaðarmaðr mikill ok óvinsæll; hann gerði margan óskunda ok óspekð í héraðinu. Hann gerði sér virki suðr við Friðmundará skammt frá Vatnsdalsá við gjá eina, ok gekk nes í milli gjárinnar ok árinnar, en hamarr stórr fyrir framan. Grunaðr var hann um þat, at hann mundi blóta mönnum, ok var eigi sá maðr í dalnum öllum, er óþokkasælli væri en hann.<sup>155</sup>

17. ***Víga-Glúms saga (1), ch. 17*** Glúmr gat börn við konu sinni. Hét Már sonr hans, sem var getit, annarr Vigfúss. Váru báðir efniligir ok all-ólíkir; Már var hljóðr ok spakr, en Vigfúss hávaðamaðr mikill, ójafnaðarmaðr, rammr at afli ok fullhugi.<sup>156</sup>

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<sup>153</sup> ÍF 14, 185: 'That same summer a ship came into Blönduós in Langadalur. Aboard it, Ormr, the nephew of Skeggi and brother of Ásbjörn, came out [to Iceland]. And when Skeggi heard the news of his kinsman's arrival he rode to the ship and invited Ormr home with him for the winter, and Ormr went home with him. Ormr was grown so that he was bigger and stronger than other men; powerful in his strength and the most valiant of men; and full of belligerence; and he thought no one was his equal. He was a great fighter and full of inequity.'

<sup>154</sup> ÍF 11, 69: 'Þórðr is the name of a man. He was a man in the service of Bjarni from Hof. He took care of Bjarni's riding horses, and that was why he was called hrossamaðr. Þórðr was a very inequitable man and he wanted to let everyone know that he was in the service of a powerful man. But he himself was not worth much, and he was not popular.'

<sup>155</sup> ÍF 8, 46: 'A man was named Þórólfr and he was called heljarskinn; he claimed land in Forsæludalur; he was a very inequitable man and unpopular; he was responsible for many outrages and upheavals in the district. He made himself a fortress south by Friðmundará, a little way from Vatnsdalsá, against a gorge, and he did this on a large crag jutting from the promontory between the gorge and the river. He was suspected of human sacrifice and there was no man in all the valleys who was thought to be worse than him.'

<sup>156</sup> ÍF 9, 56–7: 'Glúmr had children with his wife. Már was the name of his son, as was noted, and the second was Vigfúss. Both were remarkable and totally dissimilar; Már was quiet and wise, but Vigfúss was an aggressively ambitious man, inequitable, powerful in strength and dauntless.'

18. *Víga-Glúms saga (2), ch. 17*: Sá maðr bjó á Jórunnarstöðum, er Halli hét ok var kallaðr Halli inn hvíti; hann var Þorbjarnarson. Móðir hans hét Vigdís; hon var dóttir Auðunar rotins. Hann hafði fóstreat Einar Eyjólfsson, er þá var kominn byggðum í Saurbæ. Halli var sjónlauss; hann var við öll sáttmál riðinn í héraði, því at hann var bæði vitr ok réttðæmr. Hans synir váru þeir Ormr ok Brúsi skáld, ok bjuggu þeir í Torfufelli, en Bárðr bjó á Skáldsstöðum. Hann var hávaðamaðr ok ójafnaðarmaðr mikill ok vígr hverjum manni betr, ormalugr ok ákastasamr; hann átti Unu Oddkelsdóttur ór Þjórsárdal.<sup>157</sup>

The chapter numbers given here refer to modern practices in editing and translating these texts; although they do not refer directly to divisions in the medieval text they provide a rough sense of where in the narrative these *ójafnaðarmenn* are introduced. As is already clear, many of the sagas under discussion use their narrative catalysts within the earliest part of the story. The significance of this, and of delaying the introduction of the *ójafnaðarmaðr*, is considered in Chapter 3.

First I will undertake an examination of the categories that make up character introductions. Many of the broader observations about structuring a character's introduction will be relevant to other kinds of character besides the *ójafnaðarmaðr*, however such a general survey of introductions has not yet been performed, so the basics of the mode are worthy of discussion here. Character introductions are descriptive passages that provide the information most necessary for the audience's interpretation of the character's coming role in the unfolding narrative. They range from the most basic information on kin and land to elaborate paragraphs detailing physical appearance and known behaviour; and as I will argue, the level of detail provided regarding various categories of significant information indicates a great deal about the motivation of the saga.

These categories of information can be broken down into the building-blocks of an introduction. Those given below can be used flexibly but always hark back to the matters of most importance for a contemporary, native audience: who you were related to, what their landholdings and finances were and how they were perceived to behave around others. All of the subdivisions of the categories given below have been drawn from the examples above, meaning that the specific nature of the characteristics and actions referred to below relate to *ójafnaðarmenn* rather than saga

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<sup>157</sup> ÍF 9, 57–8: 'This man lived at Jórunnarstaðir, who was called Halli, and he was called Halli inn hvíti; he was the son of Þorbjörn. His mother was called Vigdís, she was the daughter of Auðunn rotinn. He had fostered Einarr Eyjólfsson, who came afterwards to Saurbær. Halli was blind; he was in agreement with all in the district because he was both wise and just. His sons were Ormr and Brúsi the poet, and they lived at Torfufell, and Bárðr lived at Skáldsstaðir. He was an aggressively ambitious man and very inequitable, and he fought each one of his betters; [he was] a gossip and provoker of others; he married Unnr Oddkelsdóttir from Þjórsárdalur.'



characters in general; although it would not be difficult to expand any of these categories in order to account for characters described in more positive terms.

- CHARACTER NAME
- KIN
  - Patronymic(s) given
    - Ancestors named more fully
  - Wife named (and described)
    - Wife's family
  - Siblings or children named (and described)
  - Other kin named or described
- LAND
  - Region or valley named
    - Farm named
  - Land settled
  - Information on previous landholdings
  - Name of place where ship made land
- STATUS
  - Occupation: *goði*, *hǫfðingi*, *þingmaðr*, *hrossamaðr* ('chieftain, ruler, assembly-man, horse manager')
  - Wealth descriptor, for example, *auðigr*, *ríkr* ('provident, wealthy, rich')
- CHARACTERISTICS
  - Physical features, such as strength, size
    - Appearance, for example hair colour, description of face
  - Personality, *ójafnaðarmaðr* and other descriptions
    - Public perception, words such as *óvinsæll* ('unpopular')
- ACTIONS
  - Usually negative, including: theft, unsolicited dealings with women, killing without compensation

The prerequisite for a character introduction is that at least some combination of these categories is present. It becomes apparent from these examples that the only essential, universal part of introductions is the character's name; even regarding the introductions of groups of sibling

*ójafnaðarmenn* found in examples 7, 11 and 12 above, the characters are individually named rather than simply grouped by their shared patronymics.

Each one of the other categories of attributes can be narrativised to a greater or lesser extent. For instance, the information given on land is in most cases just the name of the individual's farm, taking the form of 'hann bjó í [farmstead]' ('he lived at [farmstead]') or similar. Yet in example 2, far greater detail is given regarding Þórólfr Bjarnarson's settlement. He does not merely take (*nema*) land, as examples 5, 12 and 16 describe it; rather Þórólfr's introduction hints at the important role land will play in his dealings with other people in *Eyrbyggja saga*. Whilst the saga gives comparatively little in the way of active detail regarding Þórólfr's personality (*ójafnaðarmaður* is the only word used to describe his character), his personality is revealed just as eloquently through the tale by which he gains his first farm in Iceland. Þórólfr is ambitious (he thinks little of his parents' land), aggressive (he gains his own land through a duel), apparently not a fair-minded individual (the duel is with an aged man who is characterised as a champion [*kappi*] to Þórólfr's *víkingr*) and he is motivated by wealth (he sells much of the land he has just won). Later events in the saga reveal the relevance of this vignette,<sup>158</sup> whilst land is a more incidental detail in many other characters' stories.

Additionally, whilst it is useful to demonstrate the separate groups of information that may appear within character introductions, such groups are necessarily somewhat artificially binary. Status is something that can be conveyed by kinship just as it can be conveyed by holding a *goðorð* and wealth lay as much in landholdings as in vague descriptors. This explains why little would be gained by treating these groups in the manner of a Motif-Index; another factor is that emphasis is typically laid on a particular part of a character's introduction through expansive details rather than through the order in which different information is deployed. With this in mind, I will proceed to examine the categories outlined above as portrayed in the eighteen introductions. This follows the general order of kin, land, status, characteristics and actions, although examples discussed in more detail will inevitably blur the lines between these rough categories of information.

## 2.ii.b: Kin and land

In this section the sagas' use of kin and land are addressed together, because some individuals are identified as much by where they lived as by who their parents were. For example: #4, Óspakr, son of 'Kjallakr frá Kjallaksá af Skriðinsenni'.<sup>159</sup> Óspakr and his father are also mentioned

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<sup>158</sup> 3.i.b; Merkelbach, 'Revenants and a Haunted Past', p. 18; Byock, *Feud*, p. 108.

<sup>159</sup> 'Kjallakr from Kjallaksá of Skriðinsenni'.

in *Grettis saga*, where Kjallakr is still identified only by the place-name Skriðinsenni and not by his ancestors.<sup>160</sup>

The emphasis of this section will largely be on examples relating to kin, however, as the prominence of land in Þórólfr bægifótr's introduction has already been mentioned as an exemplar above. In addition, the absence of kin will be considered as significant as the presence of extensive genealogical material. Because of the way in which genealogical material underpins the whole tradition of saga-telling, this section is much lengthier than those that follow on status, characteristics and actions (2.ii.c–e), so subheadings will guide the reader through the various trends, highlighting instances where kin are either notably absent or significant in their presence.

### Horizontal and vertical integration into the tradition

By naming relevant kin and geography the sagas position their characters within a wider sphere of experience, allowing an audience with the relevant cultural knowledge to forge links to other stories or genealogies that they know, or simply to acknowledge a geographical link to the story in named places that remain familiar. This latter possibility especially remains true of the sagas to this day, as demonstrated by a renewed interest in reading the sagas 'on location';<sup>161</sup> such an approach now seems like a radical departure from the critical scrutiny of sagas' geographical knowledge typified by work such as Sigurður Nordal's, which cast *Hrafnkels saga* as literary fiction partly on the basis of what Sigurður deemed to be its lack of geographical knowledge.<sup>162</sup> Yet although a modern audience understands how unlikely it is that two Swedish *berserkir* cleared the road across Berserkjahraun on Snæfellsnes, this does not affect the fact that when passing through this countryside we recall the story told about them in *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Heiðarvíg saga*.

Whilst place-names situate the characters of a saga geographically for us, the names of ancestors, descendants or other relatives must have allowed an audience familiar with the material to situate the characters chronologically as well; these might be conceptualised as horizontal and vertical axes upon which to position individuals. There are countless names that appear across the sagas — no doubt largely in genealogical material associated with the introduction of other characters — that a modern audience lacks a context for. It seems probable that such a proliferation

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<sup>160</sup> ÍF 7, 36.

<sup>161</sup> At the forefront of this approach are Emily Lethbridge and her colleagues at Háskóli Íslands; see Lethbridge, *Saga-Steads*. Háskóli Íslands has offered a paper on the subject: MIS805F Landscapes, Places and Sagas about Early Icelanders.

<sup>162</sup> Sigurður Nordal, *Hrafnkels saga*, pp. 26–8. Cf. Hughes, 'Review of *Uppruni og þema*', pp. 301–2, n. 8.

of people would not occur unless the original audience had the appropriate context for many of these names to appear meaningful; *Landámabók* is, after all, far from comprehensive regarding the population of settlement era and saga age Iceland.<sup>163</sup> This context does not, of course, have to rely upon a modern notion of historical accuracy, merely upon the existence of an established tradition that accounted not only for the focussed stories that emerged into sagas, but also for more esoteric family-centred material.<sup>164</sup>

By comparing genealogies in this sense to the performance register known as *ekphrasis* we might better identify how a medieval audience envisioned the complex webs of families described by the sagas. *Ekphrasis*, far from describing a genre of descriptive poetry,<sup>165</sup> was originally used of a rhetorical style which was intended to have a very specific effect on its audience: they were to envisage the subject matter of the *ekphrasis* through their mind's eye, as clearly and as vividly as possible, through the speaker's use of language.<sup>166</sup> This is not to suggest that any art from medieval Scandinavia sought to evoke this particular rhetorical technique, I mean merely that *ekphrasis* offers a parallel to the way in which genealogical information might have appeared to an audience with the contextual knowledge to make use of it. Where Webb explains it as 'an active stimulus to imaginative involvement',<sup>167</sup> so we might think how, as a modern audience, we read saga genealogies. Much of a first reading of a saga will leave us baffled by the many genealogies and new introductions,<sup>168</sup> however the more sagas we read and the more times we read a particular saga, the more characters we recognise by name. Thus genealogies, too, become 'an active stimulus to imaginative involvement': when a character we recognise is mentioned, the list of names before us briefly ceases to be just a list whilst we pause to remember where else that character has appeared, what conflicts or lawsuits they participated in or had an effect upon, and how the subject of the current saga might fit in with what we have encountered of this character elsewhere.<sup>169</sup> A more modern parallel for the digital age might be the idea of a drop-down menu; 'clicking' on, or accessing

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<sup>163</sup> For instance, Byock suggests an early population of 10–20,000, whilst he claims that *Landnámabók* contains approximately 3,500 names: Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, pp. 9, 97.

<sup>164</sup> Gísli Sigurðsson, *Medieval Icelandic Saga*, p. 42.

<sup>165</sup> As the term is still commonly used in many disciplines, including Old Norse: see articles in the same volume as Hines and Rowe, 'Ekphrasis: Round-Table Discussion'.

<sup>166</sup> Webb, 'Ekphrasis Ancient and Modern', *passim*, esp. p. 13.

<sup>167</sup> Webb, 'Ekphrasis Ancient and Modern', p. 17.

<sup>168</sup> Cf. Phillpotts, *Edda and Saga*, p. 190.

<sup>169</sup> See also Gísli Sigurðsson, '*\*Immanent saga of Guðmundr ríki*', p. 214.

memories of one character reveals further ‘options’ or stories regarding their portrayal in the corpus of sagas.

### Traditional Referentiality

Returning to the introduction of the *ójafnaðarmaðr* #4, Óspakr Kjallaksson: the mention of his young son Glúmr is an example where we have enough in the way of context to see how such genealogical material functioned. Glúmr is named by *Grettis saga* and *Bandamanna saga* in addition to *Eyrbyggja saga*, although he plays no role in *Eyrbyggja saga*.<sup>170</sup> By mentioning him, however, the saga forges a link to these other narratives for the reader familiar with them; we cannot, of course, say whether these *specific* connections to the literary texts we now know under these titles were made by the sagas’ original audience, but no doubt they were able to make their own connections where other narratives were known. Additionally, in Glúmr’s case *Eyrbyggja saga* acknowledges his role in other stories: ‘hann átti son þann, er Glúmr hét ok var ungr í þann tíma’.<sup>171</sup> The phrase ‘í þann tíma’ (‘at the time’) implies that when Glúmr was no longer *ungr* (‘young’) he could be expected to be involved in the action. Indeed, that we are meant to expect more of Glúmr is shown when the saga returns to him briefly following his father’s death and alludes to the narratives otherwise known from *Grettis saga* and *Bandamanna saga*.<sup>172</sup>

The sort of information that less prepossessing relatives such as Brandr, brother of Víga-Styrr and Vermundr mjóvi brought to the minds of a medieval audience is unfortunately unknowable. However, one might reasonably expect that there were those who traced their descent from Brandr Þorgrímsson rather than his colourful brothers, and who would still have an interest in hearing of and preserving their connection to the main action of the story.

### Contrast through courtesy

The ubiquity of contrast in character introductions has been observed before, although the ways in which the contrast is described has not been looked at in detail.<sup>173</sup> Whilst little information about Brandr Þorgrímsson can be discerned in the tradition, and his only other association in Styrr’s introduction (#3) is to his land, other siblings perform a more explicitly contrastive function.

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<sup>170</sup> ÍF 7, 36–7; 141; 164; 265; 298.

<sup>171</sup> ‘[H]e had a son from this marriage, who was called Glúmr and was young at the time’.

<sup>172</sup> ÍF 4, 168.

<sup>173</sup> Schach, ‘Character Creation’, pp. 242–5; 256.

Vermundr Þorgrímsson, for instance, whose description instantly sets him apart from Styrr, is described not by his landholdings, like Brandr, but by his physical appearance, like Styrr. His willowy good looks (*hár, mjór, fríðr sýnum*)<sup>174</sup> follow his brother's more detailed physical description (see 2.ii.d), which portrays a collection of striking features including handsome eyes, a large nose and a receding hairline.<sup>175</sup> The opposition between the brothers that is set up here alludes to their future enmity and the clash between differing personalities that directly results in the arrival in Iceland of two Swedish *berserkir*; a plotline that ends in Styrr's daughter's marriage to Snorri goði (see 3.i.b).

Other examples of this kind of contrast are found in descriptions of a courteous sister in a household full of her boorish brothers, as in examples 7 and 12. *Gunnars saga* introduces Helga Þorgrímsdóttir in the opening lines of the saga in order to establish our opinion of the hero's future wife (a prize catch to be extracted from a troublesome and turbulent household — albeit one with a *goðorð* ['chieftaincy'] attached), and never again uses any form of the word *kurteiss* ('courteous/courtly'). *Njáls saga*, on the other hand, deploys the contrasting sister and the term itself in a less focussed manner. Guðrún náttól is never given direct speech by the narrative, and is in fact only alluded to in order to coax and bully a pair of reluctant Norwegians into joining the Egilssynir's ill-advised vendetta against Gunnarr af Hlíðarendi.<sup>176</sup> The term *kurteiss*, on the other hand, is to be found throughout the first half of *Njáls saga* of men and of women, and of heroes (Gunnarr) and scoundrels (Sigurðr Lambason: a *hávaðamaðr*, amongst other things).<sup>177</sup> The contrast between Guðrún and her brothers is thus far more diluted than Helga's contrast with her brothers: Guðrún is bait, dangled to explain why Þórir and Þorgrímr get involved in this conflict.

The category of attributes given to contrasting siblings can be of some significance for how we view their role in the saga, and also within tradition. Brandr Þorgrímsson's staid association with a named farm leads instantly to the reassuring (if by no means necessarily *accurate*) assumption that he is a person rooted in tradition, history, and physical space, who may or may not be significant later in the saga, but who anchors his brothers to something solid. Styrr and Vermundr meanwhile are introduced through their neatly contrasting physical appearances and their nicknames: *styrr*, 'tumult', more accurately being the nickname of Arngrímr Þorgrímsson and Vermundr's appearance lending him the epithet *inn mjóvi*, 'the slim'. This is a clue to the audience that the saga is interested in details and close-ups of these two men and indicates that at some point in the narrative's genesis, their appearance became of interest; whether because someone claimed an accurate account of it,

<sup>174</sup> '[T]all, slender, fair in appearance'.

<sup>175</sup> Cf. Bagge, *Society and Politics*, p. 147.

<sup>176</sup> ÍF 12, 154; 160.

<sup>177</sup> ÍF 12, 53 and 105. See also 5; 30; 73.

or because conventions binding personality and appearance had begun to influence the telling of the saga.<sup>178</sup>

More ephemeral than the physical appearance of these characters is the description of traits such as being *kurteiss* in opposition to less desirable qualities. These unequivocal descriptions of personality are not always to the taste of modern audiences; we feel like the saga is giving the game away too soon, revealing too much about characters in advance of them participating in the narrative, and thus denying us our own interpretation (see further below, 2.iii and Part II). ‘Post-classical’ by most standards, it is perhaps unsurprising that *Gunnars saga* only provides this kind of high contrast, subjective information in its introduction of Þorgrímr’s children. Nevertheless, all of these examples introduce whole kin-groups to their saga; the father or eldest brother is associated with the farm or land, leaving the next echelon of siblings free to be announced simply by appearance and/or personality. In that sense, there is commonality between the examples from *Eyrbyggja saga*, *Gunnars saga* and *Njáls saga*.

### Isolation from tradition

On the whole, the eighteen examples of introductions to *ójafnaðarmenn* do not offer many opportunities to draw a detailed family tree for the characters they introduce. Even examples of those described as chieftains such as Þorbjörn Þjóðreksson (#9) can be associated with very few other named relatives in their introductions. This is hardly surprising, given that one of the audience’s typical expectations when introduced to an *ójafnaðarmaðr* is that the character will come to an untimely end at the hands of the protagonists. Whilst higher status characters like chieftains can subvert these expectations to varying degrees, many of the characters introduced as *ójafnaðarmenn* are implied to be of low status and little consequence — yet not lacking in ambition.<sup>179</sup>

Additionally, comparisons with other texts reveal the possibility that certain information could have been deliberately omitted from these introductions.<sup>180</sup> Þorbjörn Þjóðreksson is in fact related to other very well-known figures from the surviving corpus of *Íslendingasögur*: according to

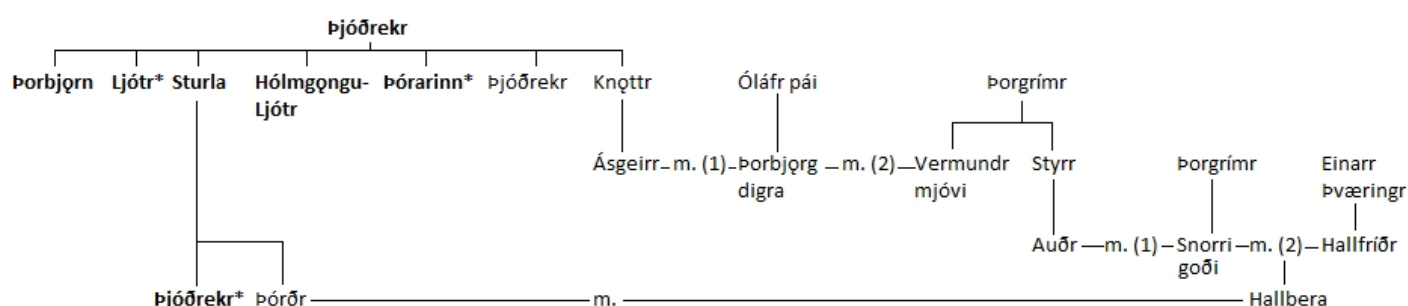
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<sup>178</sup> Lönnroth, ‘Rhetorical Persuasion’, p. 167.

<sup>179</sup> Those who do survive include several characters discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. Of the examples addressed in Part I only two escape a violent death: examples 1 and 17 (see 3.iii).

<sup>180</sup> Cf. Schach, ‘Character Creation’, p. 249. Schach’s convoluted attempts to explain discrepancies between genealogies are challenged, along with many of his assumptions by Gísli Sigurðsson, ‘\*Immanent saga of Guðmundr ríki’.

this collective tradition, his nephew Ásgeirr Knattarson married Þorbjörg digra Óláfsdóttir, who later married Vermundr mjóvi.<sup>181</sup> His brother Víga-Sturla is even associated with another of the *ójafnaðarmenn* listed here (4, Óspakr Kjallaksson), although he allies himself with Snorri goði in order to defeat Óspakr in *Eyrbyggja saga* and his son Þórðr marries one of Snorri goði's daughters.<sup>182</sup> Sturla himself appears in *Hávarðar saga* too and is killed alongside his more explicitly villainous brothers. Figure 1 shows part of the family tree one might draw for Þorbjörn including sources outside *Hávarðar saga*.



**Figure 1:** Þorbjörn Þjóðreksson's family tree. Those in **bold** indicate characters named in *Hávarðar saga*; those with an \* are only found in *Hávarðar saga* (cf. ÍF 6, 336, n. 1; 348, n. 1).

Unlike the editors of *Hávarðar saga* my concern is not whether Hólmgöngu-Ljótr lived at the farm the saga says he lived at, or whether he was really the brother of Þorbjörn.<sup>183</sup> Rather I think that it is significant that the saga in which Þorbjörn is introduced — in the opening lines, no less — as a despicable villain, chooses to focus on relatives who remain unattested in other surviving sources, and neglects to mention his family's connection to some of the *Íslendingasögur*'s most ubiquitous figures — beyond conceding that he is *stórættaðr* (well-connected) in his introduction. Without wishing to place too much emphasis upon the negative evidence for widespread knowledge of Þjóðrekr's other sons, we might instead focus on the fact that genealogies in character introductions clearly do not necessarily function in an acquisitive way, accumulating all known information on a character in one single place. Were the saga to open with a more expansive genealogy, reminding us of Þorbjörn's connection to the well-regarded chieftain Ásgeirr,<sup>184</sup> then his ignominious behaviour in

<sup>181</sup> ÍF 7, 291, n. 1; cf. ÍF 1, 159, n. 6.

<sup>182</sup> ÍF 4, 158, 165–8, 181.

<sup>183</sup> ÍF 6, 348, n. 1.

<sup>184</sup> ÍF 15<sup>2</sup>, 5.



the narrative might be held to taint the reputation of his more respectable kin, or it might encourage us to misplace our expectations of his behaviour, or indeed of the plot as a whole.

Þorbjörn's brother Sturla, a valued ally to Snorri goði in *Eyrbyggja saga*, receives no introduction of his own in the text. He is first mentioned by Þorbjörn himself: 'er þat kominn út Sturla, bróðir minn, ok Þjóðrekr, sonr hans',<sup>185</sup> and Sturla is never given the kind of introductory profile examined here. The need to acknowledge a connection to Snorri goði thus never arises, which is a matter of some convenience perhaps, as the events recounted in *Eyrbyggja saga* post-date the Conversion of Iceland, whilst Sturla's death alongside his brothers in *Hávarðar saga* pre-dates the Conversion.<sup>186</sup>

Contradictions of this sort must primarily be ascribed to the variations inherent in oral traditions, but it is worth questioning whether *Hávarðar saga* omits certain information for other reasons. The saga is generally taken to be amongst the post-classical sagas in light of its parodic tone and comically decrepit hero, Hávarðr inn halti.<sup>187</sup> Criteria taken by Jónas Kristjánsson to place it firmly in this sub-genre include the observations that its revenant is derivative and its hero would apparently be 'most at home among *fornaldarsögur* ['legendary saga'] figures', but the most telling part of his summary is: '[t]here are only two sorts of people: Hávarðr and everyone on his side are good, Þorbjörn Þjóðreksson and all his lot are bad.'<sup>188</sup>

The absence of his more familiar relatives contributes towards our impression of Þorbjörn as a villain, and consequently to our view of the saga as one with a particularly binary opinion of good and bad. The saga makes no mention of any surviving heirs to any of the Þjóðrekssynir (notable, given that one of their descendants, through Sturla, is Hafliði Másson), nor are their ancestors mentioned beyond the father, who is represented solely by the patronymics stemming from his name, Þjóðrekr. Þorbjörn is thus isolated from wider traditions, allowing his death (and those of Sturla and his otherwise unknown son Þjóðrekr, and Þorbjörn's brother Ljótr) to function solely as a cathartic experience for the audience, in that the only person obliged to mourn these deaths is the

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<sup>185</sup> ÍF 6, 315: 'Sturla, my brother, has arrived; and Þjóðrekr, his son'.

<sup>186</sup> In this case, *Hávarðar saga*'s version can only be 'sjálfsagt ranglega' ('self-evidently incorrectly') told, according to the editors of *Eyrbyggja saga*: ÍF 4, 158, n. 1.

<sup>187</sup> Owing to the differences between *Landnámabók* (primarily *Sturlubók*) and *Hávarðar saga* it has also been supposed that an older, more sober account of events existed before the saga in its current form, cf. ÍF 1, 182–6. Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, p. 287.

<sup>188</sup> Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, p. 287.

aged Þórarinn Þjóðreksson. Þórarinn's own death at the close of the saga is the catalyst for the return of the triumphant heroes to Iceland, where 'urðu þeir ágætir menn'.<sup>189</sup>

Given that additional family members seem to be reasonably well known to the tradition, it seems simplest to assume that *Hávarðar saga's* construction of and portrayal of the family of its *ójafnaðarmaðr* was a deliberate choice. Previous scholarly tastes may have inclined towards explaining this as symbolic of the saga's lateness and its ignorance, however it is connected in many ways to some of the most 'traditional' saga narratives, not only through the family under discussion, but also through the presence of the frequently occurring figure Gestr Oddleifsson and the influential chieftain Steinþórr á Eyri.<sup>190</sup> Whether we choose to believe that these individuals are included because of shared oral traditions, or whether we think there can only have been literary input into a saga of this 'derivative' type is of little consequence; Steinþórr is best known nowadays from *Eyrbyggja saga*, which features Sturla Þjóðreksson and references his son's marriage to Snorri goði's daughter.<sup>191</sup> Whilst I feel that a shared knowledge of oral traditions is the simpler explanation, even the traditional view that *Eyrbyggja saga* predates *Hávarðar saga* (in its present form) allows for the saga's access to this additional genealogical material.<sup>192</sup>

If, therefore, we imagine an audience already familiar with this supplementary information, then the question remains as to what the point was of omitting said information. Even if all this material was available to the saga's audience, we must assign a conscious motivation on the part of the narrator to steer minds away from the more prestigious traditions concerning this family. From the opening lines the saga makes it clear that this is a narrative in which it is worth putting aside the details and just getting on with the clear-cut distinction between good and bad.

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<sup>189</sup> ÍF 6, 356: 'they became accomplished men'.

<sup>190</sup> ÍF 6, 303; 310 and *passim*. On both Gestr and Steinþórr's introductions, the editors comment in the footnotes upon the unlikelihood that these characters were 'really in the saga'. 'Alls óvíst er yfirleitt um það, hvort Gestur Oddleifsson hefir í rauninni komið nokkuð við sögu Hávarðar'/'Er því Steinþór ranglega settur í hlutverk þeirra feðga í sögunni' ('It is by no means certain that Gestr Oddleifsson really had a role in the saga of Hávarðar'/'Steinþórr is wrongly placed within the story of the siblings' deeds'), ÍF 6, 303 n. 1; 310 n. 1.

<sup>191</sup> ÍF 4, 156; 165–8; 181.

<sup>192</sup> Einar Ól. Sveinsson, 'Formáli', ÍF 4, p. xlv; Guðni Jónsson, 'Formáli', ÍF 6, pp. lxxxix–xc. Forrest Scott provides some evidence for a far later date than previously favoured, which could allow *Eyrbyggja saga* to be considered a contemporary of *Hávarðar saga*, however, he does not suggest any specific date himself: 'Introduction', pp. \*21–3. Most recently, Andersson favours the late thirteenth century (as against *Hávarðar saga's* unchallenged fourteenth-century dating: *Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, p. 150).

## No kin: no significance

Whereas *Hávarðar saga* shows an *ójafnaðarmaðr* deliberately isolated from tradition, other sagas introduce characters who are entirely impossible to connect to wider families. One of the few characters who, in addition to having no genealogical material in their introduction, are not associated with their own land is example 15, Þórðr hrossamaðr (*Þorsteins þáttr stangarhöggs*). As his by-name implies, he is the horse-steward for a more powerful man, Bjarni Brodd-Helgason; Þórðr is not even given a patronymic to link him to the norms of the society in which he appears, because his only meaningful connection is to his employer. He is a tool used by the saga to urge Þorsteinn Þórarinnsson into an action that will ultimately gain him the respect and support of a man he would otherwise never have had a hope of interacting with.<sup>193</sup> Other examples of characters without kin include 10 (Þorbjörn from *Króka-Refs saga*) and 16 (Þórólfr heljarskinn from *Vatnsdæla saga*); like Þórðr they last a vanishingly short amount of time in the narrative before they are killed by a more heroic character. The former is an itinerant trouble-maker, thrust upon the district in which the saga is set by dint of having been evicted from everywhere else; through this, therefore, we know all that we need to about his past, and his ancestors are of no relevance. Similarly, Þórólfr heljarskinn is one of a series of opponents encountered by the Ingimundarsynir during the early days of settlement in northern Iceland; his origins are less important than what his death can do for the protagonists.

## Well-connected but ill-fated

Where wider traditions regarding a family exist, not all sagas treat their *ójafnaðarmenn* to the same kind of isolation as *Hávarðar saga* does. Examples 3, 8, 14, 17 and 18 also come from established families with connections to other *Íslendingasögur*. Whilst 12 shows an impulse to list ancestors, it appears that in this case the surviving wider tradition about Egill Kolsson and his sons centres upon them and their involvement with Gunnarr af Hlíðarendi. Although a modern audience has no way of assessing whether or not additional material regarding Kolr and Óttarr bǫllr has since been lost, the only mention of the family in *Landnámabók* gives the same genealogical information as *Njáls saga*, and in both the Sturlubók and Hauksbók versions the family is explicitly connected with Egill and his sons' dispute with Gunnarr.<sup>194</sup> Thus rather than tapping into a wider tradition concerning Kolr and Óttarr bǫllr by naming them in example 12, their names are most likely used to embellish the introduction of Egill and his sons. Their inclusion serves to give Egill's family more

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<sup>193</sup> See Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, pp. 67–75, esp. p. 67.

<sup>194</sup> ÍF 1, 356–7.

significance as opponents of the much-admired Gunnarr, in that they cannot be dismissed from the narrative as easily as 10, 15 and 16, above.

Examples 8, 14 and 18 are all connected to well-known families. #8, Kjartan Þorsteinsson, is the brother of Refr inn gamli who appears as a forefather of Sæmundr fróði Sigfússon in the Hauksbók *Landnámabók*;<sup>195</sup> although there is no mention of Kjartan himself in any version of *Landnámabók*.<sup>196</sup> Whether he is omitted from *Landnámabók* for bad behaviour is an unanswerable question; the significant part of the genealogy in *Harðar saga*, rather than Refr, seems to be the mother, Þorbjörg katla, who is said to be ‘fjölkunnig mjök ok in mesta galdrakona’ (‘very knowledgeable in magic and a great sorceress’).<sup>197</sup> Whilst contemporary traditions show the beginnings of Sæmundr fróði’s popular career in folk tales (in which he wields considerable supernatural influence), these narratives contain a lot of foreign influence.<sup>198</sup> In *Harðar saga* it is more appropriate to interpret Þorbjörg’s sorcery as part of the native language and traditions of the *Íslendingasögur*, where her practices are in all probability intended to explain the nature of her sons, especially the socially disruptive *ójafnaðarmaðr*.<sup>199</sup> Such a reading is secure in light of Kjartan’s consistent appellation by his matronymic, Kötluson, throughout *Harðar saga*.

Example 14, which introduces Ormr to *Þórðar saga hreðu*, works in a slightly different way: he has no patronymic in his introduction and is connected only to his uncle Miðfjarðar-Skeggi and brother Ásbjörn. Slightly earlier in the saga, when Ásbjörn is introduced, it is revealed that their parents are one Þorsteinn hvíti and Skeggi’s sister, Sigríðr; none are otherwise attested except for the well-known Miðfjarðar-Skeggi.<sup>200</sup> Much of *Þórðar saga*’s narrative purpose is in the pitting of its hero, Þórðr Þórðarson, against improbable odds and well-connected men. The importance of Ormr’s connection to Skeggi is made explicit following his death at the hands of Þórðr: ‘[m]ikill tíðendi segir þú, víg Orms, frænda Skeggja, ok munu margir frændr eptirsjár veita með Skeggja’.<sup>201</sup> Thus it is his familial connections that explicitly affect the drive of the plot.

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<sup>195</sup> ÍF 1, 49.

<sup>196</sup> ÍF 1, 58–9; 174.

<sup>197</sup> ÍF 13, 63.

<sup>198</sup> In later traditions Sæmundr’s influence over the supernatural is less about his magical knowledge and more about the triumph of Christianity over the Devil; Einar Ól. Sveinsson, *Folk-Stories of Iceland*, pp. 196; 202; 212.

<sup>199</sup> Cf. Hrolleifr and his mother Ljót in *Vatnsdæla saga*, discussed below, 3.ii.c, pp. 105–6.

<sup>200</sup> ÍF 14, 176, n. 3; p. 185, n. 1.

<sup>201</sup> ÍF 14, 193: ‘this is big news you have, the slaying of Ormr, Skeggi’s kinsman, and there will be many grieving relatives to lend support to Skeggi’.

*Ójafnaðarmenn* numbers 17 and 18 echo each other in *Víga-Glúms saga*: they are introduced one after the other following the conclusion of Víga-Skúta's dispute with Víga-Glúmr and both cause hardships for their fathers.<sup>202</sup> 17, Vigfúss, is the son of the saga's eponymous protagonist, whilst Bárðr is the son of the sympathetically portrayed Halli inn hvíti — who is the cousin and foster-father of Víga-Glúmr's enemy: Einarr Eyjólfsson. The conflict between Vigfúss and Bárðr inexorably draws the powerful Mǫðrvellingar, led by Einarr, into Glúmr's ongoing conflict with the Esphœlingar, and the fact that one of the participants is Glúmr's son ensures that the protagonist is fully committed. Einarr goes on to exile Glúmr from his farmstead, and the saga would have us believe that Einarr's wiles are the only thing that keep his brother Guðmundr ríki from death at the hands of an aged, vengeful Glúmr.

I will not dwell long on the final example of this kind of *ójafnaðarmaðr* here, as like Óskþakr Kjallaksson and Þórólfr bægifótr his part in *Eyrbyggja saga* will be more fully discussed below in Chapter 3. Víga-Styrr Þorgrímsson's family are naturally a part of his introduction as it leads out of the saga's prologue concerning earlier generations of the inhabitants of Snæfellsnes. He is one of the saga's Kjalleklingar, at loggerheads with the Þórsnesingar from the settlement period, and yet the marriage of his daughter to Snorri goði forms an end to this dispute and links him to an even more notorious and well-connected family.

## Land

Þórólfr bægifótr, already discussed above, has one of the most interesting connections to land in these introductions. In other examples, the farm-names given often elicit grumbling footnotes in the Íslenzk fornrit editions, with complaints that such-and-such a farm was never in that valley, or so-and-so could not possibly have lived there (although whether this occurs with more frequency regarding *ójafnaðarmenn* than other characters is beyond the scope of this thesis).<sup>203</sup>

#16, Þórólfr heljarskinn's introduction tells us that he was a settler who *nám* ('took/claimed') land in Forsæludalur in Northern Iceland, and who made a fortification 'suðr við Friðmundará skammt frá Vatnsdalsá'.<sup>204</sup> This location is at the head of Forsæludalur and so the two pieces of information are not necessarily contradictory, although later on the saga tells us that he was forced to move to the head of the valley and build his fortification only once intimidated into leaving his

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<sup>202</sup> ÍF 9, 56–8.

<sup>203</sup> For example: ÍF 6, 336, n. 1; ÍF 13, 63–4, n. 3; cf. ÍF 11, 216, n. 4 where Oddr's missing farm is named.

<sup>204</sup> ÍF 8, 46: 'south by the Friðmundur river, close by the Vatnsdalur river'.

farm by the Ingimundarsynir.<sup>205</sup> The introduction comes several chapters before any action involving him, and in this way its presumptive content echoes its early placement. This allows Þórólfr's inclusion in a list of the other local settlers, and clearly the fortification was one of the most memorable aspects of the story.

## 2.ii.c: Status

The status of *ójafnaðarmenn* in saga society varies considerably throughout the examples. From the lowliest horse-keeper to the most powerful settler-chieftain, anyone has the potential to disrupt the social and narrational balance of the sagas. The status of characters can be conveyed through their genealogies, as discussed above, and the references to their landholdings. In addition, the saga may give an indication as to the size of an individual's household, whether or not they hold a chieftaincy (and how they obtained it), and whether they are known to be rich or otherwise.

Two of the most interesting examples pertaining to status in these introductions allude to the latter category: *ójafnaðarmenn* who are otherwise not particularly well-connected, but whose wealth is mentioned directly in their introductions. These characters are #5, Qlviðr Oddsson from *Fljótsdæla saga* and #10, Þorbjörn from *Króna-Refs saga*. Beyond functioning as a marker of status, wealth in itself has no specifically negative connotations, although a lack of generosity combined with a love of money (*féggjarn*) was identified by Bagge as a particularly bad quality for a king to have, and it is clear that characters who are reluctant to part with money are a problem in the *Íslendingasögur* also.<sup>206</sup> *Heiðarvíga saga* emphasises the need for wealth in order to travel and in order to gain influence, whilst the stories of Snorri goði outwitting his uncle Þorkr in *Eyrbyggja saga* and of Ófeigr outsmarting the greedy chieftains in *Bandamanna saga* demonstrate how money can be used to one's advantage in the society represented by the sagas, providing one uses it cleverly.<sup>207</sup> Snorri goði never receives punishment for his involvement in several killings because he is always willing to pay compensation; *ójafnaðarmenn* and their peers are traditionally reluctant to do this.

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<sup>205</sup> ÍF 8, 82.

<sup>206</sup> Bagge, *Society and Politics*, p. 149.

<sup>207</sup> ÍF 3, 244; 266; ÍF 4, 25–6; ÍF 7, 321–4.

## Sources of wealth

The wealth-descriptors used in the introductions of Qlviðr and Þorbjörn imply that they are men of substance, whose goods are not directly described as ill-gotten gains: Qlviðr is *atdráttamaðr mikill* ('a very good provider for his household') and Þorbjörn *auðigr* ('wealthy'). Although they are initially described as such without reference to any other factor that might have led to their wealth, it may be inferred from separate information that in both cases the wealth stems from their antisocial actions. This information comes as part of the introductory description of Þorbjörn, whilst we have to read a little further before we see Qlviðr providing for his farm by borrowing someone else's horses because his own have gone missing.<sup>208</sup> The introduction to Þorbjörn lists his attributes, before explaining how others have tried to deal with his behaviour. It then returns to his attributes and repeats them all:

Maðr er nefndr Þorbjörn,

**auðigr**

**ok ódæll ok vígamaðr mikill**

***ok inn mesti ójafnaðarmaðr.***

*Hann hafði búit í öllum landsfjórðungum.*

Höfðingjar ok öll alþýða höfðu þenna mann brutt gervan,

*hverr ór sínum landsfjórðungi,*

***fyrir sakir ójafnaðar***

**ok vígaferlis.**

**Öngan mann hafði hann fé bættan.**<sup>209</sup>

There is a mirroring effect in this passage that emphasises both Þorbjörn's expertise at killing and his *ójafnaðr* by repeating them in the opposite order: 'vígamaðr mikill ok inn mesti ójafnaðarmaðr [...] fyrir sakir ójafnaðar ok vígaferlis'. His wealth appears to be a part of this emphasis too: 'auðigr [...] öngan mann hafði fé bættan'. Sandwiched between the two references to his *ójafnaðr* is the information that he has lived in all quarters of the land — and that this is because he has been

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<sup>208</sup> ÍF 11, 217.

<sup>209</sup> ÍF 14, 119–20: 'A man is named Þorbjörn, **wealthy and overbearing and a great fighter and the most inequitable of men**. He had lived in all quarters of the land. Chieftains and ordinary people had driven this man away from each of their districts **because of his inequitable behaviour and killings**. **No man had ever received compensation from him.**'

driven out of all quarters of the land. We might therefore quite justifiably infer from this introduction to Þorbjörn that the only reason that he is *auðigr* is because he has never paid compensation for his crimes. This elegant mirroring of information is quite unique amongst my data-set.

It is striking that Qlviðr in *Fljótsdæla saga* is described in positive terms as a provider for his farm before he is revealed as fatally foolish. Yet the initial description of him is also one of the most negative introductions listed here. He is described as ‘mikill maðr vexti, allra manna málgastr, ósvinnr ok óvinsæll, heimskr ok illgjarn ok í öllu ójafnaðarmaðr’.<sup>210</sup> This list contains the highest variety of negative qualities of all the introductory descriptions listed above and its impact is greater for the fact that it is a single sentence, packed with punchy one-word terms rather than phrases explaining the nature of Qlviðr’s character. That this is followed immediately by the claim that he was ‘atdráttarmaðr mikill’ might well be seen as irony; how can he be so accomplished at providing for the farm if he is that stupid and unpopular? The explanation is not what would be considered a good method of providing for one’s farm: deliberately and knowingly using the horses of a man whose family is renowned for its attachment to those animals in particular.<sup>211</sup> Hence these two descriptions of well-off men seem in fact to explain their wealth as a result of their disruptive actions as *ójafnaðarmenn*, suggesting that without the kin to explain one’s status, being a rich *ójafnaðarmaðr* was cause for suspicion.

### Evaluation of status

The term *ójafnaðarmaðr* alludes to a discrepancy between an individual’s evaluation of themselves and society’s evaluation. As Ormr (14) ‘þótti engi sinn jafningi’ (‘thought no one was his equal’), so *Þórðar saga* shortly afterwards confirms that things are indeed *ójafn* between him and the rest of society. However, whilst this quotation implies that Ormr sees society as a vertical scale with him at the top, the saga’s own evaluation, ‘hann var [...] fullr upp ójafnaðr’ (‘he was [...] full of inequity’), makes more sense as an expression of the division between those inside social norms and Ormr, who lies outside and beyond them. This is the key imbalance of the *ójafnaðarmaðr*; his

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<sup>210</sup> ÍF 11, 216: ‘a large man, of all people the most malicious in speech, unwise and unpopular, foolish and ill-willed, and in all things an inequitable man’.

<sup>211</sup> The horses belong to Ásbjörn Hrafnkelsson – a son of the chieftain (and *ójafnaðarmaðr*) who killed a man for riding his prized horse in *Hrafnkels saga*. The saga itself underlines this point by having Qlviðr’s men remind him of this fact. ÍF 11, 217.



opinion of himself and his actions is not in accord with the opinion of the saga narrator. He is a character set up for a fall that the audience can anticipate from some distance.

A number of examples show the discrepancy between how these characters view themselves and how they are viewed by the narrator — who for the most part may be said to represent the norms of the historically indistinct society described by the sagas. From Ormr's haughty opinion of others, to Þórólfr's dim view of his parents' land (2, 'þótti þat lítit búland' ['he thought it was poor farmland']), through 11, Sǫlmundur Víðarsson's mercenary take on the 'lítilmennska' ('inadequacy') of the man whose daughter he intends to seduce, and 15, Þórðr hrossamaðr's adoption of his employer's status as a reflection of his own; these are characters who do not see themselves as confined to the space they ought to be content with.<sup>212</sup> It is uncontroversial to note that most saga characters are 'on the make', however these particular individuals are singled out for judgement in their introductions — their methods invalidate their attempts to participate in the everyday struggles for power and influence.

There are many other indications that this is the case in these introductions, not least of which are the characters' tendencies to steal, take and womanise, and the frequency with which terms like *óvinsæll* ('unpopular') appear in these descriptions. Indeed, as observed by Lönnroth, 'very often the narrator chooses to characterize a person by telling what other people thought about him.'<sup>213</sup> Being an unpopular man in the sagas is probably more of a certain guarantee of doom than being an *ójafnaðarmaðr*. Without *vinir* ('friends/allies') or the support of public opinion a character is divorced from many of the social bonds that contribute towards support and protection when rules are bent or broken in order to facilitate an increase in status.<sup>214</sup> This may be countered to some extent if an entire household bands together in their *ójafnaðr*, as in examples 6, 7, 11, 12, or where a large kin group supports the *ójafnaðarmaðr* amongst them, as in 2, 3, 14, 18.<sup>215</sup> Even outside society's boundaries there are obligations between kin and associates.<sup>216</sup>

Discrepancies between personal evaluation, public evaluation and the evaluation of the omniscient narrative voice reveal the subtlety of the vocabulary used to describe certain characters. The idea of personality is built up only through a combination of functional, structural elements of the narrative such as the character introduction, and through the audience's understanding of this introduction by means of its conventional reference points. As the character interacts with others

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<sup>212</sup> Cf. Thersites: 1.iv, p. 20.

<sup>213</sup> Lönnroth, 'Rhetorical Persuasion', p. 167.

<sup>214</sup> Jón Viðar Sigurðsson, *Den vennlige vikingen*, p. 13.

<sup>215</sup> Cf. Byock, *Feud*, p. 107.

<sup>216</sup> 4.ii, pp. 138–9.

and we view their actions, constantly evaluating our opinions of each character's reliability as a witness in relation to the narrator themselves, we form an individualised picture of the person in our minds. These ideas are more fully explored in Part II.

#### 2.ii.d: Characteristics

The characteristics found in these introductory passages can provide a physical description as well as a portrait of a character's personality; usually emphasis is laid on the latter, with perhaps a token hint towards size and strength. #1 and #3 are the only two examples in which more detail about the characters' appearance is given. I discuss the general use of phrases like *mikill ok sterkr* ('big and strong') before moving onto those two more specific examples, finishing with the other words given to describe these characters' personalities.

#### Physical formulae

Examples 1, 3 and 8 feature the common couplet *mikill ok sterkr*, with close variations also appearing in 4 and 14 and a reference at least to one of the two qualities in 5 and 12. The appearance of this phrase and of an interest in size and strength is not confined to the introductory descriptions of *ójafnaðarmenn*, and is common enough to suggest it had become something of a convention in the narrative grammar of the sagas. In order for a phrase to become steeped in traditional referentiality it must have begun life as a significant and contextually relevant phrase. In his study of *Heimskringla*, Bagge observed that even the least successful, apparently ill-thought of kings were still described in glowing physical terms.<sup>217</sup> Height was especially important, and that may be what is reflected here in the descriptions of 'miklir menn ok sterkir', as Bagge found that the ideal king was no different from the ideal man; he was just better in every respect.<sup>218</sup> The phrase is a staple of character descriptions throughout the sagas, hence it cannot be said to have a particular association with disruptive figures. Size and strength would obviously give any man athletic and martial advantages over others as well as advantages in practical, everyday farming activities, so despite its frequency in these particular character descriptions we may assume that it was generally thought to be a positive attribute if one was big or strong; although in the case of *ójafnaðarmenn* it could no doubt contribute to the extent of the trouble they might cause.

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<sup>217</sup> Bagge, *Society and Politics*, p. 287, n. 5.

<sup>218</sup> Bagge, *Society and Politics*, p. 152.

It is easy to see how as a complimentary description ‘mikill ok sterkr’ could come to be used in a clichéd manner. In modern English the couplet ‘big and strong’ is still held out as an aspiration for children: ‘finish your vegetables if you want to grow up big and strong!’ Yet the reason that the kings studied by Bagge were described as handsome or physically impressive, despite other failings, was that noble blood and an authorial insistence on hereditary kingship had to guarantee at least some good qualities even in bad kings.<sup>219</sup> There is no such obligation to include praiseworthy features in a description of an Icelandic farmer or merchant, so why do the sagas so frequently apply these compliments to characters including *ójafnaðarmenn*?<sup>220</sup> In many of the examples I would suggest that beyond any traditional or habitual reflex towards its inclusion, the phrase when applied to an *ójafnaðarmaðr*, or any potential adversary, serves to make the threat that they pose to society or to the protagonists more serious. Most of those whose introductions include the phrase or a similar allusion to size and strength are apparently young men, or have a more explicit connection to physical violence than others, such as 4, Óspakr the sea-faring thief. Whether explaining a longer life expectancy within the narrative than other *ójafnaðarmenn* (1, Þorkell Rauðfeldarson and 3, Styrr) or making the deeds of their adversary seem more impressive (14, Ormr; killed by an older man),<sup>221</sup> the use of the phrase still has an effect on how we view the character.

If we accept a degree of traditional referentiality in the repeated use of the phrase ‘mikill ok sterkr’ then it seems likely that a similar impulse lies behind the recurrence of phrases such as ‘inn mesti ójafnaðarmaðr’ (‘the most inequitable of men’), found in examples 1, 2, 4, 7, 9, 10 and 12. Of course, like *mikill ok sterkr*, the basic set-up of ‘inn mesti [*descriptor*]-maðr’ extends beyond its use in the introductions of disruptive men and is a staple of character introductions in general. On a basic level, the alliteration of ‘m’ may contribute to the frequent use of this phrase, as character descriptions are one of the most common positions in which such euphonic elements are found in saga narrative.<sup>222</sup> Although Lönnroth associates superlatives solely with panegyric descriptions,<sup>223</sup> their use here actually suggests that in this respect *ójafnaðarmenn* and their peers are not described in terribly different terms from other men.

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<sup>219</sup> Bagge, *Society and Politics*, p. 148.

<sup>220</sup> Andersson, ‘Displacement of the Heroic Ideal’, p. 580.

<sup>221</sup> ÍF 14, 188.

<sup>222</sup> Lönnroth, ‘Rhetorical Persuasion’, pp. 165–6.

<sup>223</sup> Lönnroth, ‘Rhetorical Persuasion’, p. 165.

## Physical details

The details of Þorkell Rauðfeldarson's appearance (#1) are entirely within the bounds of expectation for a character otherwise described in terms common to antagonists, who is in addition a malevolent supernatural being. Dark hair is often an indicator of trouble,<sup>224</sup> and Þorkell's matching *svartr* ('dark/black') complexion evokes familiar imagery such as, for instance, that found in *Rígsþula* to describe 'Þræll'.<sup>225</sup> Styrr's introduction (#3) provides more detail and its purpose is more obscure than the one given for Þorkell; the saga lingers on imperfections and exaggerations, and once more Woloch's analysis of Thersites' introduction comes to mind: 'the text [...] lavishes physical attention on him. The portrait of Thersites is actually *more* detailed than any physiognomy to this point in the poem.'<sup>226</sup> The same is true of Styrr's introduction; although striking physical features are alluded to regarding several characters who appear before Styrr (generally through nicknames: Ketill flatnefr; Þórólfr Mostrarskeggi; Þórólfr bægifótr), his is the first detailed physical description in the saga.

Lönnroth and Bagge acknowledge the tendency to include 'realistic' ugliness or distinctive features amongst otherwise handsome ones in physical descriptions.<sup>227</sup> Styrr has the common distinction of being *eygðr vel* ('handsome about the eyes'),<sup>228</sup> but his other features (large nose, heavy bone structure, shaggy eyebrows, receding hairline) distinguish him from the only other character described in such detail by *Eyrbyggja saga*. Styrr's introduction is paralleled most closely by the description of the nearest character *Eyrbyggja saga* has to a protagonist: Snorri goði Þorgrímsson, who is first named just prior to Styrr's introduction, but not described until a short time later.<sup>229</sup> 'Snorri var meðalmaðr á hæð ok heldr grannlegr, fríðr sýnum, réttleitr ok ljóslitaðr, bleikhár ok rauðskeggjaðr';<sup>230</sup> unlike Styrr, Snorri's features are regular, although he has a similar hair colour. Styrr's physical appearance echoes his personality: like Thersites there is rather *too much* of him, whilst Snorri is unprepossessing, a man of average height and slight build who in personality is 'hógvær hversdaglega. Fann lítt á honum hvort honum þótti vel eða illa.'<sup>231</sup> This no doubt contributes

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<sup>224</sup> Lönnroth, 'Rhetorical Persuasion', p. 167.

<sup>225</sup> ÍF E1, 450, st. 7.

<sup>226</sup> Woloch, *The One vs. The Many*, p. 4.

<sup>227</sup> Lönnroth, 'Rhetorical Persuasion', p. 166; Bagge, *Society and Politics*, p. 147.

<sup>228</sup> Bagge, *Society and Politics*, p. 147.

<sup>229</sup> See also Schach, 'Character Creation', pp. 147–8.

<sup>230</sup> ÍF 4, 26: 'Snorri was of an average height and was also slender; fair in appearance, with regular features and a pale complexion; blonde hair and a red beard'.

<sup>231</sup> ÍF 4, 26: 'generally calm. He gave away little about whether he thought well of things or ill.'

to Snorri's survival into old age, as opposed to Styrr the *ójafnaðarmaðr*'s violent death. Nevertheless the two share the red hair that tends to be associated with volatile personalities in Norse tradition.<sup>232</sup> Their connection indicates a future alliance and its importance to Snorri goði's ascent to power and influence.

Tarrin Wills has speculated that physical features such as Styrr's receding hairline suggest an unconscious association in medieval character description between baldness and aggressiveness — a connection that has since been established scientifically to be a result of high testosterone levels.<sup>233</sup> There are perhaps not enough examples in the *Íslendingasögur* to demonstrate this conclusively, but it may help to explain why this is one attribute that Styrr appears to have too little of, rather than too much of.

### **Beyond *ójafnaðr***

Most of the introductions discussed here use more than the one word to describe their characters' personalities, although it is no indication of how important the characters are likely to be to the narrative. Our evaluation of a character's importance depends upon what kind of information is provided about them as well as how much. For instance, as already discussed, Qlviðr Oddsson's litany of defects (5) is no indication that he has a large role to play in the saga, whilst 2, Þórólfr bægifótr (whose personality is described no further than that he is an *ójafnaðarmaðr*) is anchored to the saga's plot in a more substantial way by the short narrative included in his introduction that narrates how he acquired his land. Even in terms of personality traits, not all negative information we receive regarding these characters produces the same expectations. Words such as *heimskr* and *illgjarn* ('foolish' and 'ill-willed'), as found in Qlviðr's introduction, are far less open to circumstantial interpretation than *garpr* or *vaskligr* ('bold' or 'valiant') (as found in 11 and 14, for instance). Table 1 gives all the descriptions of personality found in these examples besides *ójafnaðr*.

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<sup>232</sup> Björn Hítðælakappi, Grettir Ásmundarson and Þórr have red hair: Ranković, 'Grettir the Deep', p. 797; Boberg, *Motif-Index*, A128.2.

<sup>233</sup> Wills, 'Physiology and Behaviour', p. 289.

Word	Translation (literal, if different)	Number of occurrences	Introduction (as numbered above)
óvinsæll	unpopular	5	5, 6, 8, 15, 16
ódæll	overbearing	3	6, 7, 10
hávaðamaðr	aggressively ambitious (roaring, rushing)	2	17, 18
vígamaðr	killer/warrior	2	10, 14
ofstopamaðr	overbearing, arrogant man	1	3
ópokkasæll	charmless, unpleasant	1	4
málgastr	talkative, gossipy	1	5
ósvinnr	unwise	1	5
heimskr	foolish	1	5
illgjarn	malicious	1	5
ofsi	arrogance	1	6
uppivöðslumikill	turbulent, rambunctious	1	7
illa skapi farinn	maliciously minded	1	8
garpr	brave	1	11
óeirðarmaðr	inclement man	1	11
kappsamr	impetuous, contentious	1	12
vaskligr	valiant	1	14
ofrkappi	belligerent	1	14
fullhugi	courageous	1	17
qrmálugr	talkative, gossipy	1	18
ákastasamr	taunting, provocative	1	18

Table 1: Descriptions of personality found in introductions to *ójafnaðarmenn*

None of these words has quite the same meaning as *ójafnaðr/ójafnaðarmaðr*, although the notion of misjudging one's position in society can still be inferred from some of them. *Óvinsæll* and the importance of popularity have been discussed at 2.ii.c, but the terms *hávaðamaðr*, *uppivöðslumikill*, *ofstopamaðr*, *ofsi* and *ofrkappi* might be seen to imply a similar self-regard to that implicit in the quality of *ójafnaðr*. *Uppivöðslumikill* has at its root *uppivaðsla*, sharing the element -*vað*- ('wade') with *hávaðamaðr*. Both words are therefore reliant upon the imagery of high, rushing waters; they evoke relentlessness, but in actuality describe the person willing to wade through such

waters.<sup>234</sup> Whether this is foolhardy bravery or arrogance presumably depends upon the circumstances, but in any case these words bring to mind the image of an individual going against the current, which might be said to represent the community at large and its social norms. The underlying concern with reciprocity that is the key to *ójafnaðr* is not present, however, so it is safe to say that where characters are described as both *ójafnaðarmaðr* and *hávaðamaðr* the intention is not merely the emphasis of a single quality, but the distinction between two different elements that contribute towards disruptiveness; going against the norm, specifically through an unwillingness to reciprocate appropriately.

The other three words (*ofstopamaðr*, *ofsi* and *ofrkappi*) each express a similar sense, although their meanings also differ subtly. The prefixes *of-* and *ofr-* found in the first and last of the three give the instant impression of over-abundance of a certain quality,<sup>235</sup> and whilst being a *kappi* ('champion') is not usually a bad thing in itself within the sagas, being overzealous in the championing of a cause is self-evidently undesirable. Despite the temptation to associate *ofstopi* with modern English ideas of 'overstepping', its meaning more literally evokes similar ideas of the immovable object *versus* unstoppable force found in *hávaðamaðr* and *uppivöðslumikill*.<sup>236</sup> *Ofsi* meanwhile shares a superficial similarity, echoing the prefix *of-*, but it is not of the same construction and has the rather less vivid meaning 'arrogance, haughtiness'.<sup>237</sup> Nevertheless, arrogance is also part of a matrix of terms relating to how one is perceived and how one perceives oneself; an arrogant person places a greater value on themselves than is warranted, especially in the eyes of others.

Another common words for disruptiveness which might be thought of as a parallel to '*ójafnaðarmaðr*' is found in these introductions: *ódæll*, where *dæll* is clearly related to *deill* and *deild*.<sup>238</sup> Modern English analogies help to unpick the meaning of *ódæll* and its semantic kinship with *ójafnaðr*: whilst *dæll* literally means 'gentle, forbearing', it is also used in the same sense as its English cognate, when one 'deals' with something; meanwhile *deill* associates itself with the idea of

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<sup>234</sup> *Vaða* is also used metaphorically in Old Norse as in modern English: to wade into battle. Cleasby-Vigfusson, s.v. *vaða*.

<sup>235</sup> Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon, *Orðsifjabók*, s.v. *of* (3); *ofur* (2).

<sup>236</sup> Ásgeir Blöndal Magnússon, *Orðsifjabók*, s.v. *ofstopi*; *stop* (2), the stem *stop* 'virðist hafur bæði í merk[ingu] "stífur, uppstæður" og "steypast" og "stúfur og stýfa"' ('seems to have the meanings "stubborn, rigid" and "to dive/drop" and "to cut short, stiffen"').

<sup>237</sup> Alexander Jóhannesson, *Etymologisches Wörterbuch*, s.v. *ofsi*.

<sup>238</sup> Cleasby-Vigfusson, s.v. *dæll*.

‘dealing out’, be it portions, cards or fate.<sup>239</sup> The imbalance and lack of reciprocity underlying *ójafnaðr* therefore finds its closest connection in this term, even if the most natural translation remains ‘ungentle or not a forbearing person’.

Turning to the positive qualities in the table and those that might be considered ambiguous or dependent on context, there is, for the most part, little to be said. Of most interest are the few ambiguous terms and those which focus on public speech. The latter refers to the pair of words relating to gossip (*málgastr*, *qrmálugr*) and the word *ákastasamr* (provocative, taunting). The introductions of Vigfúss Víga-Glúmsson and Bárðr Hallason (17 and 18) are unusual in that they pit two *ójafnaðarmenn* and *hávaðamenn* against one another; yet Bárðr is the one to whom the more negative qualities are applied (he is a gossip and a taunter), whilst Vigfúss is otherwise described in terms that might just as well be used of a hero (*rammr at afli*, ‘powerfully strong’ and *fullhugi*, ‘brave’).

Being the son of the saga’s protagonist no doubt contributes to Vigfúss’ more ambivalent introduction, whilst Bárðr’s attributes may as well have been applied to him by his rival as much as by the saga itself. Bárðr accuses Vigfúss’ foster-father, the unpopular Hallvarðr, of theft (not inaccurately), but Vigfúss bullies his father into acquitting the thief. At a horse fight sometime later the two men clash and their meeting ends with Bárðr insulting Vigfúss and the latter laughing heartily in the ominous fashion of his kinsmen.<sup>240</sup> From Vigfúss’ perspective it makes good sense to portray the man who has attacked his foster-father and publicly insulted him as someone of unreliable account.

## 2.ii.e: Actions

Not all the examples provide specific information about what kind of actions led to a character being deemed *ójafnaðr*, but a number do, and there are trends regarding the kind of behaviour one expects from an *ójafnaðarmaðr*. Theft and womanising are not unique to these kinds of character of course, but alongside duelling and refusing to pay compensation they are behaviours that conform to what has already been observed regarding the disregard of *ójafnaðarmenn* for reciprocal behaviour. Where the killing of others appears in these introductions it is always qualified with an extra detail to make it explicit that this is not socially-sanctioned vengeance killing: Þórólfr heljarskinn (16) is accused of human sacrifice; the *vígaferli* of Þorbjörn (10) is never paid for through

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<sup>239</sup> Cleasby-Vigfusson, s.v. *dæll*; *deill*.

<sup>240</sup> ÍF 9, 62.



compensation and Þórólfr bægifótr (2) kills through duels. Although duelling was likely a part of the early laws of Iceland those who duel in the *Íslendingasögur* are often portrayed negatively; perhaps partly because of pre-Christian associations, perhaps because of the connection between duels and *berserkir*.<sup>241</sup> Duelling is clearly a cause for concern as it has the potential to disrupt social balance and undermine the status of others if men might achieve power simply through feats of strength and arms.<sup>242</sup>

In saga narrative, personal gain through duels is clearly not considered to be a good way of increasing one's standing, and was discouraged as such because victory over a higher status opponent would instantly draw the wrath of their kin.<sup>243</sup> Duelling denies the expected reciprocity of society in a number of ways and it is a way of obtaining settlement that is as likely to result in additional damage to the original injured party as it is to redress the balance of injury. Additionally, it can place an accomplished duellist outside and above the law, free to get away with any injustices they choose to commit because they are able to defend themselves from any repercussions.

Similarly, womanising in these introductions is highlighted as an area in which these characters excel at ignoring and overriding other members of society. Þorbjörn Þjóðreksson (9) and the Viðarssynir (especially Sǫlmundr) (11) are implicated in this, and in both examples it is explicit that a large part of the problem is that these men do not respect the fathers of the women enough to even ask permission or to offer compensation for keeping their daughters as mistresses. It is an example that might easily be compared with theft and forceful taking (*rán, taka [af]*).<sup>244</sup> Whilst Miller distinguishes *rán* as a legitimate aspect of reciprocal dealings (it is done only after the intention to do so has been announced, whilst theft is done in secret), the implication in the introduction of Ingólfr sviðinn and his son Þorbrandr (6) is that even though everyone knew their intent, no one had been able to do anything to stop the relatives from taking property 'með kúgan eða ránum' ('with threats or force'). Like Þorgrímr and his family (7), Þorbjörn Þjóðreksson (9) and in certain respects Þorðr hrossamaðr (15), the actions of Ingólfr and his son are protected by the status of a chieftain;

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<sup>241</sup> Dale, *Berserkir*, pp. 171–5; 177. A different aspect of the motif of duelling (perhaps more precisely the other side of the same coin) is clearly at play in duels between rivals in the *skáldasögur*, where the heroes might be said to have more in common with the knight errant than the marauders found in other *Íslendingasögur*.

<sup>242</sup> Interestingly, in the context of settlement lore, it seems that the violent taking of land was not universally stigmatised: Laura Taylor suggests that in such instances the use of violence was preferable to an account in which one's ancestors received land for free, equating them with tenant farmers: Taylor, 'Land and Landownership', pp. 104–5.

<sup>243</sup> See Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, p. 73.

<sup>244</sup> Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, pp. 83; 89.

two of these examples *are* chieftains who abuse their status, whilst in 6 Ingólfr has the chieftain, Vermundr mjóvi, in his pockets and in 15 Þorðr uses the power of his employer to justify his own arrogant behaviour. Exchange (of words, goods, threats, people, murders) ought to be about accountability, but when the person (or people) to whom these characters are meant to be accountable is unable or unwilling to enforce justice and reciprocity then *rán* must surely have exited the bounds of acknowledged reciprocal behaviour.

### 2.iii Patterns and trends in character introduction

Character introductions might be said to '[conform] with the fundamental structural principle of the Sagas of Icelanders, namely, that of anticipation and fulfilment.'<sup>245</sup> In likening them to 'dreams and portents', Paul Schach observes that these passages tell us exactly how the story is going to unfold, giving a lot away to the practiced reader through a careful deployment of certain types of information.<sup>246</sup> There is as much of a sense of fate around character descriptions as there is around prophecies and it is difficult to unpick from them whether they describe characteristics that are an innate part of a person, or simply refer pre-emptively to actions to come in the saga.

The examples that imply these personality traits were an inherent part of a person and were thus unchangeable are the names given to Víga-Styrr and his opposite, Snorri goði. Both are re-named for their difficult personalities when still in childhood but only *Eyrbyggja saga* takes a marked interest in this inverted nominative determinism, and then only seemingly to reinforce the parallels between these two characters. Þórólfr bægifótr's introduction in the same saga shows a different picture; he is a *víkingr mikill* ('great viking') before he duels for land, after which the saga specifies that he is an *ójafnaðarmaðr*. Later it reiterates: '[h]ann tók nú at eldask fast ok gerðisk illr ok æfr við ellina ok mjök ójafnaðarfullr',<sup>247</sup> making Þórólfr's cultivation of the quality of *ójafnaðr* appear unequivocal. The actions and deeds alluded to in the introductions discussed above (2.ii.e) reinforce the overriding impression that the sagas' descriptions are for the most part direct judgements on the character's later deeds in the narrative.

As an audience that primarily comes to the sagas through the written text, when we first read these descriptions, the more they focus upon personality traits defined by actions still to come, the more we may lose patience with this blurring of narrative chronology. Such foregrounding of

<sup>245</sup> Schach, 'Character Creation', p. 248.

<sup>246</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>247</sup> ÍF 4, 81: 'he began to age noticeably and became ill-natured and angry in his old age, and very inequitable'.

traits that derive from actions to be told later in the story takes away from the characters' motivation to a degree (see Part II). They do bad things for the sake of the narrative and as with Forster's flat characters, a certain kind of introduction may be taken to mean that saga characters never surprise us with their behaviour. As with prophecies concerning events, character introductions may leave the final outcome inevitable (the *ójafnaðarmaðr*'s death/punishment), but how they get to that point may not be as easy to predict. The inevitability of seeing someone like Gunnarr af Hlíðarendi get drawn into a dispute with this type of character is an essential part of the tragedy of his downfall; at the other end of the scale, the stupidity of Ólviðr Oddsson is never in question, but the mind-boggling depths of his stupidity in meddling with the horses of Hrafnkell Freysgoði's son might still give us pause for thought.

For an audience more familiar with the stories and traditions underlying the sagas, who might have been used to hearing these larger narratives broken down into more manageable chunks,<sup>248</sup> the introductions were less a cause of 'spoiler alerts' and more a knowing wink and a nod in the direction of what everyone knew to be coming. The audience can rely on the fact that these are individuals we are encouraged to love to hate; characters not to admire, but onto whom to project our disapproval.<sup>249</sup> Yet information could be omitted or added, contrasted or emphasised, related to people, actions or appearance — and all that is said or unsaid in these passages can tell us something about how the character's narrative arc plays out. Even the most basic information in the most exaggerated saga full of influence from legendary storytelling allows us to engage with the wider structure of the narrative. Such texts can indeed only be defined as 'exaggerated' or linked to other genres and influences because of the effectiveness of the traditional language used by the *Íslendingasögur*: we are immediately awake to variation.

The next chapter examines the three examples from *Eyrbyggja saga* in more detail, discussing the significance of the placement of *ójafnaðarmenn* and their introductions in the wider saga narrative. There is a consistency in the way in which *ójafnaðarmenn* function in the narrative, but their exact purpose regarding the plot and their interactions with other characters (their motivation) can also vary from text to text. Having established the fact that character introductions encourage us to look ahead into the events of the plot, guiding our expectations of what will follow, Chapter 3 takes a wider view of the context of the narrative triggers introduced here. Their impact on other characters is linked to the structure of the saga in which they appear, but it will begin to become even more clear that their position between functionality and individuality is only fully defined by their relationship to other characters in the sagas — and others' introductions.

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<sup>248</sup> Clover, 'Long Prose Form'.

<sup>249</sup> Cf. Andersson, 'Displacement of the Heroic Ideal', p. 580.

### 3: ANTICIPATING ACTION: THE POSITIONING OF CHARACTER INTRODUCTIONS

The present chapter explores more fully the function of the narrative catalyst. Building on Chapter 2's study of individualised introductions, I catalogue the various ways in which the characters affect the wider narrative. The *ójafnaðarmaðr* is put to use in a variety of ways to disrupt the narrative equilibrium. Although the *ójafnaðarmaðr* does not always perform the same role in the same way in the various sagas discussed, patterns of usage are observable. Whilst Chapter 2 examined how these characters were introduced, here I examine their position in the wider narrative. Many of them are introduced in the opening chapters of the saga, often in the opening lines, suggesting that an undisturbed equilibrium does not last for long in these narratives.

I begin with a close reading of *Eyrbyggja saga* (3.i) before examining the narrative impact of each of the characters listed in Chapter 2, alluding also to the wider use of the quality of *ójafnaðr* in these sagas (3.ii). *Eyrbyggja saga* has been chosen as a case-study because of the high number of *ójafnaðarmenn* introduced in it as well as for its notoriously multifaceted plot. The latter will be explained through an examination of character interactions, highlighting the role of Snorri goði's enemies and the way in which *ójafnaðr* can be said to be 'targeted' towards particular characters in the saga.

The remaining sagas which feature *ójafnaðarmenn* have been grouped into four categories based upon the position of the *ójafnaðarmaðr* in the narrative and on the lasting effects of their involvement. The first category features sagas in which a dispute involving an *ójafnaðarmaðr* defines the entire narrative (3.ii.a); the second concerns *ójafnaðarmenn* who appear early in the saga and die quickly, inciting a main character to action for the first time (3.ii.b); the third describes a similar category, where the *ójafnaðarmaðr* alters the social set-up of the saga, rearranging matters enough for the ensuing narrative to continue but themselves playing no further role (3.ii.c). The final group is introduced later on in the saga and contributes specifically to a hero's downfall or defeat (3.ii.d). This offers insights into the crucial role played by the *ójafnaðarmaðr* or narrative trigger to the way in which the sagas are told, and to the constancy of this trope throughout the development of genre. At 3.iii I consider the findings of Part I of this thesis.

### 3.i: Eyrbyggja saga: multiple plots and multiple plot triggers

Whilst *Víga-Glúms saga* contains two individuals introduced as *ójafnaðarmenn*, the individuals work in a complementary fashion with each other.<sup>250</sup> Bárðr Hallason is the enemy of Vigfúss Víga-Glúmsson, whose narrative role in turn is to make trouble — albeit indirectly — for his father, the saga's protagonist. *Eyrbyggja saga*, however, introduces three men associated with the quality of *ójafnaðr*: two are introduced early in the narrative (chapters 8 and 12) along with many other characters who feature in the saga, whilst the third does not appear until much later (chapter 57 out of a total of 65 chapters). Although these chapter divisions are not necessarily medieval constructs, they give us a sense of the way in which these characters are spread out across the saga. If we expect these individuals to function as 'triggers' of a sort, bringing conflict — and with it the action of the plot — into the saga, then the number of individuals of this type in a single text must offer insights into the overall structure and plotting of its narrative.

*Eyrbyggja saga's* construction has been much discussed, and therefore it is appropriate that of all the sagas covered by this thesis it is the one to feature the most narrative triggers; the discussion many not have been linked to the triggers, but the triggers are undoubtedly linked to our perceptions of the saga's structure. Following a summary of previous approaches to the saga (3.i.a) my study returns to what may be the saga's essential contradiction: the centrality of Snorri goði to the narrative. The portrayal of Snorri is approached through the lens of the *ójafnaðarmenn* and their actions; my focus is specifically on how and to whom these characters display their inequitable behaviour and what the function is of the diverse types of narrative or plot triggers found in the sagas (3.i.b).

#### 3.i.a: Responses to the structure of Eyrbyggja saga

The most memorable summary of *Eyrbyggja saga's* structure remains Vésteinn Ólason's 1971 depiction of its numerous sub-plots and stories as channels in a glacial river: a single body of water that spreads out across a plain into a number of rivulets and streams flowing in and out of one another, only for these to re-join further downstream into a single channel.<sup>251</sup> Many other attempts to explain the saga's structure have sought for similar analogues, or aimed to discern a key to understanding the plot. The first article to focus on this issue appeared in 1959 with Lee M.

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<sup>250</sup> 2.ii.b, p. 53.

<sup>251</sup> Vésteinn Ólason, 'Nokkrar athugasemdir', p. 8.

Hollander's evocative comparison of the saga's interweaving of convoluted sub-plots with the braided clauses in skaldic stanzas.<sup>252</sup> Through this approach, Hollander searched for unity and purpose in the saga's structure.

A number of studies from the 1970s and 1980s sought to explain *Eyrbyggja saga* from a variety of structural perspectives. Some simply had the modest aim of proving the saga's unity and artistry, broadly following Hollander's line of argument or suggesting that we think of it as a 'stacked narrative'.<sup>253</sup> Others examined the balance of motifs and scenes to either side of Iceland's conversion to Christianity, or the deployment of prosimetric passages.<sup>254</sup> Rory McTurk built on this work to demonstrate that all of the diverse material in *Eyrbyggja saga* nevertheless forms a coherent whole.<sup>255</sup> His article rounds off the flurry of interest in the saga's structure that was no doubt inspired by trends in the scholarship of the third quarter of the twentieth century.

Considered as a whole, this body of work ultimately works towards refuting the criticisms Andersson levelled at *Eyrbyggja saga* in his 1967 monograph, which have had a significant impact on the way in which the text has been discussed.<sup>256</sup> Andersson misrepresents Hollander's praise for the saga's structure ('like the intercalation of Skaldic poetry, [it] is hardly fortuitous; rather it shows constant planning on the part of an author who has in mind an audience that is constantly on the *qui vive* and able to follow this method of presentation')<sup>257</sup> to suit his own dissatisfaction with the narrative: 'it is strenuous reading and structurally it has been compared to the disorderliness of *dróttkvætt* syntax'.<sup>258</sup> Unsettlingly, Andersson's views on the text have apparently not changed in the intervening decades, despite the various articles exploring the saga's structure.<sup>259</sup> 'Bored and aesthetically cheated' is his implied reaction to the saga when considered as entertainment,<sup>260</sup> whilst

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<sup>252</sup> Even by that point the saga had drawn strong opinions: see Hollander, 'Structure of *Eyrbyggja saga*', p. 222 n. 1.

<sup>253</sup> Mabire, *Composition de la Eyrbyggja saga*; Boyer, *Saga de Snorri le Godi*, esp. p. 37.

<sup>254</sup> McCreesh, 'Structural Patterns'; Livesay, 'Women and Narrative Structure'; Bibire, 'Verses in the *Íslendingasögur*'.

<sup>255</sup> McTurk, 'Structure of *Eyrbyggja saga*'.

<sup>256</sup> Andersson, *Analytic Reading*, pp. 160–2; cf. Vésteinn Ólason, 'Nokkrar athugasemdir', p. 6; McCreesh, 'Structural Patterns', p. 171.

<sup>257</sup> Hollander, 'The Structure of *Eyrbyggja saga*', p. 227.

<sup>258</sup> Andersson, *Analytic Reading*, p. 160.

<sup>259</sup> Clunies Ross, *Introduction to the Old Norse-Icelandic Saga*, p. 127; cf. Andersson, *Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, p. 153. In the latter, Andersson makes no reference to the other studies cited in this section, nor do any appear in the monograph's bibliography.

<sup>260</sup> Andersson, *Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, p. 154.

structurally and stylistically he compares it to a history or documentary, claiming that it '[sheds] what was historically suspect — the heroic figures, the rejoinders that people devise only in fiction, the rising drama found only in good storytelling, and the idea that the past was greater than the present.'<sup>261</sup> It is worth observing the contrast between the latter quote and Vésteinn Ólason's observations regarding both heroes and dry humour in the saga,<sup>262</sup> as well as Mabire's conclusion: 'il faudrait vanter la sobriété et le réalisme de son style, l'art accompli avec lequel l'auteur nous dépeint les caractères, la saveur et l'humour grinçant de certains dialogues, sans parler des tendres strophes lyriques de Björn'.<sup>263</sup>

Freed from the rigid structuralism practised during the latter part of the twentieth century, recent studies have taken a more flexible, thematic view of *Eyrbyggja saga*. Focussing on its poetry, Heather O'Donoghue's 2005 study demonstrated that the increased cohesiveness of the community in the saga was paralleled by the position of ostracised individuals such as poets and figures associated with the supernatural.<sup>264</sup> Her approach highlighted discrepancies between the portrayal of Snorri goði in verse and in prose which will be returned to below. In addition, Torfi Tulinius has recently published a revised version of research first produced in 2006 (the same year that Andersson reasserted his subjective outlook on the narrative) regarding the importance of Snorri goði to the saga.<sup>265</sup> Torfi's research draws our attention to a number of men named Þórólfr in *Eyrbyggja saga*, to the recurring theme of the dead father and to a Greimassian 'narrative contract' in the saga's declaration of the envy that Snorri goði's power elicits:<sup>266</sup> '[h]ann varðveitti þá hof; var hann þá kallaðr Snorri goði; hann gerðisk þá hofðingi mikill, en ríki hans var mjök qfundsamrt, því at þeir váru margir, er eigi þóttusk til minna um komnir fyrir ættar sakar, en áttu meira undir sér fyrir afls sakar ok prófaðrar harðfengi.'<sup>267</sup>

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<sup>261</sup> Andersson, *Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, p. 154.

<sup>262</sup> Vésteinn Ólason, 'Nokkrar athugasemdir', pp. 19–20; 14–16.

<sup>263</sup> Mabire, *Composition de la Eyrbyggja saga*, p. 59: 'the sobriety and realism of its style should be boasted of, the accomplished artistry with which the author conveys the characters to us, the richness and the discordant humour of certain conversations, not to mention the tender lyric poetry of Björn'.

<sup>264</sup> O'Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse*, pp. 92–3, 126, 134.

<sup>265</sup> Torfi Tulinius, 'Is Snorri goði an Icelandic Hamlet?'; 'Deconstructing Snorri'.

<sup>266</sup> Torfi Tulinius, 'Deconstructing Snorri', p. 199.

<sup>267</sup> ÍF 4, 27: 'he maintained the temple, he was therefore called Snorri goði; he then became a great chieftain, but his power occasioned a great deal of envy, because there were many who did not think themselves any less worthy for the sake of their lineage, but rather had more to their name in terms of power and proven valour.'

Greimas' narrative contract refers to the agreement between a hero (the subject) and his 'sender'; whoever or whatever compels him to go on a journey, or compels the narrative to proceed.<sup>268</sup> This quote about Snorri's enemies indicates that he will have to overcome them in order to successfully complete the narrative at hand. By drawing attention to this passage, Torfi brings the discussion of saga structure back to the question of whether we should think of *Eyrbyggja saga* as a 'regional' saga or a 'biographical' saga focussed on Snorri goði:

Whoever is speaking in the text promises to tell us how Snorri fares in his task of maintaining himself or growing as a great chieftain despite the opposition he is sure to meet given the circumstances described in this passage [quoted above]: he has rivals who are just as well-bred as he is but are stronger and whose strength and readiness to achieve their ends through battle have been proven.<sup>269</sup>

Jennifer Livesay suggested that Snorri's role in the saga bears most responsibility for the mixed reception the saga has received: '[i]n particular, the way in which Snorri Godi [...] comes in and out of the saga, has provoked confusion and consternation among readers who would like to make the saga a biography of Snorri but cannot.'<sup>270</sup> Torfi's work revives the idea that this saga can profitably be seen as a narrative focussed on Snorri goði, who in Torfi's reading represents the fears of the chieftain classes regarding their paternal ancestry and inheritance.<sup>271</sup> In my character-driven approach, the question of Snorri's role in the saga becomes even more crucial: how does Snorri interact with the *ójafnaðarmenn* of the saga, and what can this tell us about the perspective and focus of *Eyrbyggja saga*?<sup>272</sup> The way in which this compares with the other sagas discussed in Part I provides us with insights regarding the compositional intentions of the sagas and the native storytelling traditions underlying them.

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<sup>268</sup> Prince, *Dictionary of Narratology*, s.v. 'contract'.

<sup>269</sup> Torfi Tulinius, 'Deconstructing Snorri', p. 199.

<sup>270</sup> Livesay, 'Women and Narrative Structure', p. 183.

<sup>271</sup> Torfi Tulinius, 'Deconstructing Snorri', p. 207.

<sup>272</sup> This approach to the material is inspired loosely by Woloch's work and his notion of the 'character-space' and 'character-system'; the former is made up of the way in which a character is introduced into the narrative, whilst the latter is the culmination of all the interactions between differently depicted individuals. Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, p. 18 and ch. 1, *passim*. See also 5.i below.



### 3.i.b: The enemy of my enemy: Snorri goði's interactions with ójafnaðarmenn

The three *ójafnaðarmenn* in *Eyrbyggja saga* have each been mentioned already. I noted Þórólfr bægifótr's greed for land, Óspakr Glúmsson's familial connections and Víga-Styrr Þorgrímsson's detailed physical description.<sup>273</sup> In the case of the latter, Styrr was found to be somewhat unusual, having more in common with the description of Snorri goði in the same saga than with any other characters who were elsewhere identified with the quality of *ójafnaðr* in their introductions. Similarly Þórólfr's narrativised introduction and focus on acquiring land was found to be distinctive when compared with the use of land in other character introductions. Óspakr's introduction was of a more prosaic type, linking him to a wider tradition regarding his family, but ultimately providing the kind of information that was shown to be thoroughly conventional.

As shown, it is through the subtle deployment of information on the kin, landholdings, origins, personality, physical appearance and actions of an individual that the saga audience is given a detailed impression of how this character is likely to interact with other people in the narrative. Styrr and Þórólfr first appear within what Hollander (and McTurk after him) define as the saga's introduction (chs. 1–14),<sup>274</sup> meaning that for the purposes of their structural studies these chapters are 'different and apart' from the main structure of the saga, although still relevant to it.<sup>275</sup> These chapters recount the earliest settlers whose descendants come to be the main focus of the saga narrative that follows, ending with introductions to the descendants themselves.

Positioning Styrr and Þórólfr's introductions early in the saga contextualises them generationally within the major families.<sup>276</sup> Styrr stands out as a prominent descendant of Kjallakr gamli because of the length of his introduction; the Kjalleklingar at this point in the saga are known to be rivals in ambition and power to the Þórsnesingar, Snorri goði's family. Þórólfr, on the other

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<sup>273</sup> 2.ii.a, p. 42; 2.ii.b, pp. 45–6; 2.ii.d, p. 60–1.

<sup>274</sup> Hollander, 'Structure of *Eyrbyggja saga*', p. 223; McTurk, 'Structural Approaches', p. 232. Vésteinn Ólason considers that the 'main part of the saga' begins at Chapter 12, which puts Styrr's introduction (and Snorri's) within the main narrative; I follow Hollander and McTurk, as character introductions are more commonly associated with the 'prologue' to the saga. Vésteinn Ólason, 'Nokkrar athugasemdir', p. 8. This is not to say that the opening chapters are unconnected or unimportant to the ensuing narrative, however they are of a different mode to the following material: Hume, 'Beginnings and Endings'.

<sup>275</sup> McTurk, 'Structure of *Eyrbyggja saga*', p. 232.

<sup>276</sup> ÍF 4, 13–4; 21.

hand, bursts into the saga to join his parents and uncle, who are settlers characterised as generous and hospitable people from whom Þórólfr is distinguished by his impatience, greed and violence.

Styrr's introductory portrait is chronologically untethered. He and his brothers emerge as fully formed adults on their first appearance, meaning that this is how we imagine them throughout the saga: un-ageing and un-aged by the narrative. Þórólfr is altered in appearance even during his introduction, where the viking with a past that extends back before the narrative becomes a 'twist-footed' landowner, marked permanently in name and in nature because of a duel. The next time that we encounter Þórólfr he is changed again, with the saga telling us 'hann tók nú at eldask fast ok gerðisk illr ok æfr við ellina ok mjök ójafnaðarfullr'.<sup>277</sup> Unlike Styrr, who is fixed in our minds from the beginning, Þórólfr continues to mutate throughout the saga; aging, dying, returning as a revenant, swelling monstrously in the grave and returning again as the bull-calf Glæsir.

The impression that we get from Styrr's fixed portrait is that, despite the special interest in his appearance, it conforms to the fixity of a snapshot and is thus in line with most other character introductions. This kind of character, when intertwined with one of the most important families of the saga, can be expected to play a major role in the saga, perhaps living through a lengthy part of the plot. Þórólfr is already in motion when he appears, however. He is an adult with a past, rather than a still image of a single point in an individual's life; consequently we have different expectations for him in the ensuing narrative. Nevertheless, both individuals are from high-status families who feature prominently in *Eyrbyggja saga* and this is what gives us the strongest indication that whatever disruption they may cause as *ójafnaðarmenn* — whatever they do to develop the plot — it will likely have more serious and lasting repercussions than a character introduced with no family, little status or detail to their description.

Óspakr Kjallaksson is introduced with a similarly static portrait to Styrr's, although the presence of his wife and son gives us more of a sense of his past. Nevertheless, because he is a resident of the region around Sælingsdalur, Óspakr's past and family are of even less interest to the saga than the details of Þórólfr's viking youth abroad. As Vésteinn Ólason has observed, this part of the saga is still seen 'með snæfellskum augum',<sup>278</sup> meaning that the focus on Snorri is maintained even with a shift in setting to a new district. Thus Óspakr is defined for the audience only by the band of men he associates with and by the fact that they 'toku af hvers manns'.<sup>279</sup> His introduction comes just after Snorri's move to Sælingsdalstunga, which in this light may be viewed as a new narrative beginning; Óspakr resembles most closely the other *ójafnaðarmenn* found in early

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<sup>277</sup> ÍF 4, 81: 'he began to age noticeably and became ill-natured and angry in his old age, and very inequitable'.

<sup>278</sup> Vésteinn Ólason, 'Nokkrar athugasemdir', p. 7: 'through the eyes of someone from Snæfellsnes'.

<sup>279</sup> ÍF 4, 157: 'stole from each man'.

chapters of sagas (see 3.ii.b), a conspicuously ill-behaved and loosely connected figure who is likely to be shorter-lived in the narrative than the high status Styrr and Þórólfr.<sup>280</sup>

Snorri's interactions with these three characters are all different: he strikes an uneasy deal with Þórólfr in order to benefit himself; he marries Styrr's daughter and the two become allies; and he leads a siege on Óspakr and his men which results in Óspakr's death. This final encounter is the only one that plays out in the way that we would usually expect, whereas in the other two we see the closest person the saga has to a protagonist ally himself with characters it is normally best to avoid or to pit oneself against. The effects of this and the reasons for it may help us to understand why *Eyrbyggja saga* often confounds even practised saga readers.

*Ójafnaðarmenn* tend to affect certain people more than others; that is to say that their antisocial behaviour, violence, or inequity is targeted in the way in which it is narrated.<sup>281</sup> Much of the time the 'target' of these trouble-makers (or at least the individual or family who decide that they have the most at stake when an *ójafnaðarmaðr* is at large) can be equated with the main characters. In the broadest possible terms *ójafnaðarmenn* are the villains or antagonists to the saga's heroes or protagonists. The waters are necessarily muddied when the *ójafnaðarmaðr* in the saga is also the protagonist; for which see Chapter 5.

Styrr and Þórólfr's embodiment of *ójafnaðr* cannot, however, be said to be targeted towards Snorri goði. Styrr makes a bargain early in the saga with Snorri, promising to support him in future if Snorri does not go against him in the present case. Only once after this are they to be found on opposing sides and Snorri soon induces him to join his force during the battle of Alftafjörður.<sup>282</sup> Þórólfr's loyalties are more ambivalent, because he is not an ally of Snorri's as Styrr is, but his maliciousness never directly succeeds in targeting Snorri. Having bargained away the woodland at Krákunes for Snorri's support against his own son, Arnkell, Þórólfr finds the results of the legal case unsatisfactory and regrets the loss of the woodland; at this point he tries to make amends with his son, hoping that Arnkell will turn on Snorri on his behalf.<sup>283</sup> Arnkell refuses to be drawn on this point by Þórólfr, who dies shortly afterwards. Although in the subsequent episodes Arnkell seeks his own

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<sup>280</sup> Óspakr is related to notable people; however *Eyrbyggja saga* does not pursue this connection, whereas Styrr and Þórólfr's relatives feature in the saga. Thus we know that the deaths of the latter two characters would provoke more significant repercussions than the death of Óspakr so close to the end of the saga, with no notion that his relatives would have any opportunity to ask for compensation for a man who openly committed piracy and theft.

<sup>281</sup> Cf. Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, p. 67.

<sup>282</sup> ÍF 4, 122–3.

<sup>283</sup> ÍF 4, 91.

lost inheritance in the form of Krákunes, this is done for himself rather than his dead father; he is more Snorri's enemy than Þórólfr had the opportunity to be.

The unusual pragmatism of Snorri has long been recognised,<sup>284</sup> so it may not be a surprise to notice that he deals in unusual allies. Recalling the saga's narrative contract and the necessity for Snorri to face his enemies, we may wonder who exactly Snorri's 'enemies' are and why these *ójafnaðarmenn* cannot wholly be included amongst them. Arnkell Þórólfsson is Snorri's main rival to power in the district, as he is another chieftain and a well-liked man to boot; his violent death at the hands of Snorri and his supporters brings a close to their escalating encounters. In addition, Arnkell's death is followed by a verse quotation from Þormóðr Trefilsson's *Hrafnsmál*, which is a rare surviving praise-poem in honour of an Icelandic chieftain. Quotations from this paean to Snorri's ascent to power direct the audience to key conflicts in the saga and highlight those individuals most naturally considered to be Snorri's enemies: Vigfúss í Drápuhlíð; Arnkell Þórólfsson; Steinþórr af Eyri and the Breiðvíkingar who are involved in the battle of Álptafjörður; Þorsteinn Gíslason and those who contributed help to Styrr's killers; Óspakr Kjallaksson and his band of thieves.<sup>285</sup>

Of the men mentioned in connection with the quotations from *Hrafnsmál* the saga devotes the most narrative space to the conflicts between Snorri and Arnkell, Snorri and Steinþórr and Snorri and Björn Breiðvíkingakappi. Vigfúss's attempt on Snorri's life may be said to form a smaller part of the inevitable conflict between Snorri and Arnkell, as might the Máhlíðingamál and events between Geirríðr and Katla that are otherwise not accounted for by *Hrafnsmál* quotations. Facing Arnkell, Steinþórr and Björn brings Snorri nothing in terms of concrete material gains, whereas his interactions with Þórólfr and Styrr bring him Krákunes and a wife, respectively. The former group consists of delicate power-struggles whose outcomes are couched less in specific material terms and more in terms of a reduction in the number of his enemies. The saga itself makes this clear towards its close, reinforcing the significance of the narrative contract: '[e]n er Snorri tók at eldask, þá tóku at vaxa vinsældir hans, ok bar þat til þess, at þá fækkuðusk ofundarmenn hans.'<sup>286</sup>

If Þórólfr and Styrr are not Snorri's enemies — I shall return to Óspakr below — then whose enemies are they and what is the nature of Snorri's association with them both? What conflicts exactly do they trigger within the narrative? Þórólfr's role is the easier to discern, although one might consider Katla's words to Arnkell to be a complicating factor: 'vilda ek at mín ákvæði stœðisk, at þú hlytir því verra af feðr þínum en Oddr hefir af mér hlotit, sem þú hefir meira í hættu en hann;

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<sup>284</sup> Helgi Þorláksson, 'Snorri goði og Snorri Sturluson', p. 295.

<sup>285</sup> ÍF 4, 67; 102; 124; 156; 168.

<sup>286</sup> ÍF 4, 180: 'but when Snorri grew old, then his popularity began to increase, and that was due to the fact that those who were jealous of him had reduced in number.'

vænti ek ok, at þat sé mælt áðr lýkr, at þú eigir illan fǫður.’<sup>287</sup> In saying this as Arnkell has her put to death she equates her own malign influence on her son with Þórólfr’s influence over Arnkell. The fear that the ‘sins of the father’ could be passed on to the next generation is justified by many relationships in the *Íslendingasögur*,<sup>288</sup> but Arnkell is drawn into his father’s sphere in a far subtler manner than the belligerent way in which Oddr follows in his mother’s footsteps. Although Katla’s words imply that in the ensuing events Þórólfr’s actions can be interpreted as the result of her curse there is enough evidence that in life Þórólfr merely continues to act as he has always done, and that Katla’s words are more an accurate assessment of Þórólfr’s personality than they are words to change the course of the future.<sup>289</sup> This is supported by Þórólfr’s introduction: he has always been a viking, greedy for land and wealth, and an *ójafnaðarmaðr*, and his machinations involving Úlfarr’s land, whilst under the aegis of his increasing age and inequitability, are merely continuations of traits and occupations that he has always possessed. These questions of self-determination recur in the sagas, however, and will be explored in more depth in Chapter 4.

No doubt partially because of a eulogistic passage (not found in every manuscript of the saga, but included in the *Íslensk fornrit* nonetheless), Arnkell is commonly viewed as a well-intentioned victim, caught between the scheming of his father and Snorri goði.<sup>290</sup> In a detailed reading of this section of narrative, however, Byock makes a convincing case for Arnkell’s aggressive ambition.<sup>291</sup> He makes land-grabs that his father would be jealous of were he alive to see them; perhaps through this we may view something of Þórólfr’s personality manifesting itself in the next generation. Whether it is through the subtle influence of his father’s greed for land, or simply because of the fact that Þórólfr sowed the conflict and fear that allowed Arnkell to obtain Úlfarr and Ørlyggr’s land (which should have returned to Þorbrandr Þorfinnsson and his family),<sup>292</sup> Þórólfr is the trigger for Arnkell’s actions in this section of the saga. Þórólfr is unambiguously the enemy of Úlfarr,

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<sup>287</sup> ÍF 4, 54: ‘I want my verdict to be announced, that your lot will prove worse because of your father than Oddr’s lot has done through me, as you have further to fall than he does; I also expect that it will be said before the end, that you have an evil father.’

<sup>288</sup> Lönnroth, ‘Rhetorical Persuasion’, p. 169.

<sup>289</sup> Linking her words to the fact that Þórólfr returns from the grave does not provide a satisfactory reading either: Arnkell has dominance over Þórólfr’s malign will as a revenant, and no one killed by Þórólfr as a revenant has any bearing on the power-struggles that Arnkell is involved in. ÍF 4, 93–5.

<sup>290</sup> Scott, *Vellum Tradition*, pp. 178, 180; ÍF 4, 103. AM 447 4to is a seventeenth-century paper copy of the saga that contains Arnkell’s eulogy; the fourteenth-century vellum Wolfenbüttel 9.10. Aug. 4to does not contain this passage.

<sup>291</sup> Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, pp. 99–117.

<sup>292</sup> Byock, *Viking Age Iceland*, pp. 110–11.

yet he is also indirectly an enemy to his own son, prompting Arnkell into actions that result in his violent death.

The simplest thread in this convoluted narrative of legal rights and wrongs is that concerning Krákunes: Þórólfr gives it to Snorri; Snorri exploits the resource gladly; Arnkell resents the loss of a valuable part of his inheritance and kills one of Snorri's men working the woodland, reclaiming it for himself. The death of Snorri's man provides Snorri with an excuse to retaliate violently, and when an apparent assassination attempt fails to kill Arnkell, Snorri is persuaded to attack in force with the aid of the equally invested Þorbrandssynir. Thus an alliance with an *ójafnaðarmaðr*, although motivated by material greed, brings Snorri not only land but also consolidates his power locally by inciting a rival to overreach, justifying swift, violent retaliation.<sup>293</sup>

Styrr's role in *Eyrbyggja saga* is not as straightforward as Þórólfr's because less narrative attention is given to the aspects of his life and personality that mark him out as an *ójafnaðarmaðr*. Immediately following Snorri's first legal achievement in a case involving the chieftain Illugi svarti, the saga tells us a little more about Styrr (four chapters on from his introduction): 'Styrr var heraðríkr ok hafði fjölmennt mjök; hann átti sǫkótt við marga men, því at hann vá mǫrg víg, en bætti engi.'<sup>294</sup> This is the explanation for his status as an *ójafnaðarmaðr*, yet by separating it from his vivid, detailed introduction and placing it at the opening of a chapter that does not even concern Styrr, the saga thoroughly downplays its significance.

Subsequently, virtually all of Styrr's appearances in the saga are as an ally of Snorri's: having struck a deal at the outlawry of Eiríkr rauði, he next appeals to Snorri for assistance controlling the ambitions of two *berserkir* inherited from his brother Vermundr. Many of the events concerning the *berserkir* through to Styrr's death were also told in the first half of *Heiðarvíg saga*, and although the narrative is now only preserved by Jón Ólafsson it explains why Styrr is characterised as an *ójafnaðarmaðr* more coherently than *Eyrbyggja saga* does.<sup>295</sup> For instance, the death of Þorbjörn kjálki, which is contextualised to a limited degree in *Heiðarvíg saga*,<sup>296</sup> is given no explanation in *Eyrbyggja saga*;<sup>297</sup> nor is the reason for Styrr's own death at the hands of Gestr Þórhallsson deemed relevant enough to the narrative of *Eyrbyggja saga*.<sup>298</sup> The closest he comes to demonstrating

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<sup>293</sup> ÍF 4, 98–9.

<sup>294</sup> ÍF 4, 33: 'Styrr had a great deal of power over the district and had a large retinue; he had many quarrels with many different men because he committed a lot of killings, but never paid compensation.'

<sup>295</sup> See 2.ii, p. 34 for the preservation of *Heiðarvíg saga*.

<sup>296</sup> ÍF 3, 219–20.

<sup>297</sup> ÍF 4, 64.

<sup>298</sup> ÍF 4, 153–4.

inequity in the narrative of *Eyrbyggja saga* is during the battle of Álftafjörður, where family loyalties see him switch side midway through the fighting at the instigation of Snorri. In this case, Snorri does not mince his words: 'svá hefnir þú Þórodds, dóttursonar þíns, er Steinþórr hefir særðan til ólífis, ok ertu eigi meðalníðingr.'<sup>299</sup>

It is therefore difficult to say that Styrr is the enemy of anyone in *Eyrbyggja saga* (beyond the *berserkir*, perhaps, who stand largely outside society). In *Heiðarvíg saga*, where Styrr's introduction is missing but Jón Ólafsson recalls other characters referring to his *ójafnaðr*, the narrative tipping-point would appear to be the mocking gift of a lamb to young Gestr that seals Styrr's fate.<sup>300</sup> From this trigger-point, Styrr's death is the beginning of the sprawling, bitter feud that encompasses the rest of *Heiðarvíg saga*'s narrative.<sup>301</sup> In *Eyrbyggja saga* this defining moment of *ójafnaðr* is omitted, although instead we may say that his participation in the saga marks turning points in Snorri's dealings with Arnkell and with Steinþórr.<sup>302</sup> Switching side mid-battle is certainly an unusual occurrence in the *Íslendingasögur* and might be considered demonstrative of Styrr's flexible attitude to social rules and norms; it also sways the outcome, forcing Vermundr mjóvi to seek peace rather than fight against his brother.<sup>303</sup>

Additionally, references to Styrr's *ójafnaðr* surface in his dealings with Vermundr during the *berserkir* narrative. Within this vignette Vermundr initially wants the *berserkir* so that he can redress the imbalance of power between the two of them ('honum þótti Styrr bróðir sinn mjök sitja yfir sínum hlut ok hafa ójafnaðr við sik'),<sup>304</sup> but on finding them impossible to control, he is advised by Arnkell that it is Styrr's *ofsi* and *ójafnaðr* that make him the ideal person to take the *berserkir* off Vermundr's hands.<sup>305</sup> Whatever justifies the judgement that his actions amount to *ójafnaðr* occurs 'off-screen', however; we never see Styrr behave in this manner towards his brother and so must rely on the word of the narrator that he is *ójafnaðrfullr*.

Ultimately, Styrr's *ójafnaðr* (or his brother's fear of it) leads to Snorri's first marriage, which, whilst not a moment that the saga makes much of in itself, is the cementing of an alliance that is viewed as essential to Snorri's success. Styrr and Snorri, as their similar introductions imply, function

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<sup>299</sup> ÍF 4, 122: 'this is how you avenge Þóroddr, your grandson, who Steinþórr has mortally wounded, and you are more than usually depraved.'

<sup>300</sup> ÍF 3, 227.

<sup>301</sup> ÍF 3, 231.

<sup>302</sup> ÍF 4, 67; 122.

<sup>303</sup> ÍF 4, 123.

<sup>304</sup> ÍF 4, 61: 'he thought Styrr, his brother, towered over his affairs and behaved inequitably towards him'.

<sup>305</sup> ÍF 4, 63.

as two sides of the same coin and it is only as allies that they become a force to be reckoned with: '[e]n af tali þeira kom þat upp, at Styrr fastnaði Snorra goða Ásdísi, dóttur sína, ok tókusk þessi ráð um haustit eptir, ok var þat mál manna, at hvárrtveggi þótti vaxa af þessum tengðum; var Snorri goði ráðagørðarmaðr meiri ok vitrari, en Styrr atgongumeiri.'<sup>306</sup>

Björn, Arnkell and Steinþórr are all described as much more physically strong and capable than Snorri ever is by the saga prose.<sup>307</sup> Whilst *Hrafnsmál* ascribes many deaths to Snorri personally, the prose does not once allow Snorri's hands to be explicitly bloodied.<sup>308</sup> The set-up of his disputes with his enemies as 'brain versus brawn' is supported by the talk of his foster-brothers when Snorri meets a challenger who possesses both. Þorleifr kimbi compares Snorri and Styrr's mutual dependence unfavourably with Arnkell's independent strength of mind and body: 'ek kalla, at þar sé sem einn maðr, er þeir eru Snorri goði ok Styrr, fyrir tengða sakar'.<sup>309</sup>

Here, I believe, lies the reason for the differences between *Eyrbyggja saga*'s portrayal of Styrr and *Heiðarvígja saga*'s: Styrr and Snorri are too closely bound together politically and personally for *Eyrbyggja saga* to be explicit in the way that *Heiðarvígja saga* is about the injustice and violence committed by Styrr (and by Snorri in vengeance for Styrr).<sup>310</sup> Such deliberate manipulation of the material is plausible when we consider the discrepancies between Snorri in *Hrafnsmál* and Snorri in the prose of *Eyrbyggja saga*; clearly a very particular portrait of him was intended. The perspective that the narrative is thus forced to take to ensure that Styrr's actions do not reflect on Snorri (or indeed just to omit material on Styrr that is irrelevant to the story *Eyrbyggja saga* wishes to tell) means that it is difficult to discern Styrr's function as a narrative trigger. He is an *ójafnaðarmaðr* because tradition requires it, just as *Hrafnsmál* is included to provide evidentiary weight to the narrative, even though it simultaneously contradicts the prose surrounding it.

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<sup>306</sup> ÍF 4, 75: 'but from their discussion it emerged that Styrr had betrothed his daughter Ásdís to Snorri goði, and they made arrangements for the following autumn, and it was the speech of men, that both were thought to have grown from this relationship; Snorri goði was better at giving advice and was wiser, but Styrr was more a man of action.'

<sup>307</sup> ÍF 4, 79–80; 98, 101–2; 22.

<sup>308</sup> O'Donoghue, *Skaldic Verse*, pp. 86–7, 92–3.

<sup>309</sup> ÍF 4, 99: 'I'd say that there are some who are virtually one man, and they are Snorri goði and Styrr, due to their relationship'.

<sup>310</sup> The death of Þorsteinn Gíslason and his sons is a particularly striking event in *Heiðarvígja saga*, and shows Snorri in a ruthless light in his pursuit of vengeance for Styrr (ÍF 3, 248–9). The event is much abbreviated in *Eyrbyggja saga*: ÍF 4, 154.



The events triggered by Þórólfr and Styrr may appear to be of marginal significance within *Eyrbyggja saga*'s diffuse whole, but both benefit Snorri in his rise to power and constitute important shifts in the saga's political and social dynamics. Óspakr, counted amongst Snorri's enemies by the stanza of *Hrafnsmál* associated with him, is a simpler kind of *ójafnaðarmaðr*, who triggers a brief period of conflict in the narrative by robbing Snorri goði's representative of his share of a beached whale.<sup>311</sup> This short-lived case is positioned immediately after Snorri's move to Sælingsdalstunga, giving the impression of a new beginning in the narrative. Thus Óspakr naturally resembles the kind of narratively inconsequential threat that *ójafnaðarmenn* found in the opening chapters of a saga can pose (see 3.ii.b). He sets the scene for us: Snorri is the power in the district who organises the retaliation and preserves the peace. In comparable narratives an opening such as this would indicate to the audience who the main characters in the saga were likely to be and what the dynamics between them were; it may establish the particular social dynamics of the saga's cast. It is a curious episode to feature at the close of a saga, especially as the final decades of Snorri's life are not given any attention by *Eyrbyggja saga*. However, given what the saga does recount of Snorri following his defeat of Óspakr it contributes towards a fitting conclusion.

The episode about Óspakr ends with Snorri goði benevolently granting life and freedom to Óspakr's men: secure, presumably, in the knowledge that such individuals will prove no challenge to him in future.<sup>312</sup> Similarly he *lét* (allowed) Óspakr's widow and child stay on their farm, which alludes to the parcelling out of lives and land that he is responsible for in the final chapter of the saga, where we are told of all his daughters' marriages and all his sons' estates.<sup>313</sup> The saga thus leaves Snorri at the climax of his power, undiminished and perhaps even augmented since his move from Helgafell to Tunga, whence he can still draw on old allies such as Þrándr stígandi and also expect the support of local grandees like Sturla Þjóðreksson.

In the incident with Óspakr, Snorri has no direct contact with the thief (either in dialogue or combat) which emphasises the disparity in status between the two of them; enemy may even be somewhat too strong a term for Óspakr's relationship to Snorri. 'Local nuisance' is more applicable given the languid response Snorri demonstrates as a chieftain in a new district whose *þingmenn* are being assaulted by a bully and thief. As was the case with Arnkell, Snorri takes matters at his own

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<sup>311</sup> ÍF 4, 158–9.

<sup>312</sup> ÍF 4, 168–9.

<sup>313</sup> ÍF 4, 180–3.

pace and, unusually for a saga character, is said to thoroughly ignore public opinion: 'lét Snorri goði þar tala um hvern þat er vildi'.<sup>314</sup>

Lönnroth discusses the importance of public opinion as a tool for managing audience expectations, claiming that the saga narrator's views are evident through the opinion of the community.<sup>315</sup> What then can we infer from the fact that the saga's most enduring character ignores the approbation of the public? It is an odd attitude for a chieftain to take if we suppose that he relied upon the public for support and maintenance of his own position; although ignoring public opinion remains a way of manipulating and responding to it.<sup>316</sup> In the saga as a whole it is appropriate, however; Snorri is a distant, shadowy figure throughout much of the narrative but the public seems to have an awful lot to say about him in any case. *Eyrbyggja saga* is at its most self-contradictory where rumours of Snorri's involvement in something are concerned:<sup>317</sup> it frequently portrays him with 'the functionalised compression of real persons in the actual world',<sup>318</sup> where he is observed talking to people in conversations that we never hear, but must only suppose that we see the results of.<sup>319</sup> Similarly, throughout episodes and disputes that do not yet concern him directly, other characters worry what Snorri goði's eventual involvement will mean for them.<sup>320</sup> For a character who receives very little direct attention in the narrative of the saga, Snorri is never very far from the thoughts of the narrator or the other characters.

As in Woloch's understanding of the nineteenth-century novel, where minor characters frequently give the reader insights into the narrative arc of the protagonist, so we might say that Snorri is dragged into the narrative light due to the actions of *ójafnaðarmenn*. One of the few times that he appears concerned about his reputation is during his dealings with Þórólfr: 'eigi vil ek veðsetja virðing mína til móts við illgirni þína ok ranglæti'.<sup>321</sup> Having made use of Þórólfr's greed, it is essential to know when to draw the line; Þórólfr's negative reputation far outweighs Snorri's own

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<sup>314</sup> ÍF 4, 165; 98, 'Snorri lét þetta mál eigi til sín taka ok lét hér ræða um hvern þat er vildi': 'Snorri goði allowed them to discuss whatever they wanted to'; 'Snorri didn't let this speech get to him, and he allowed the discussion to be about whatever they wanted'.

<sup>315</sup> Lönnroth, 'Rhetorical Persuasion', pp. 167–70, esp. p. 170.

<sup>316</sup> My thanks to Ármann Jakobsson for this suggestion. Pers. comm. delivered as feedback to Shortt Butler, 'Making Space for Power in *Eyrbyggja saga*'.

<sup>317</sup> See ÍF 4, ch. 43, *passim*.

<sup>318</sup> Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*, p. 20.

<sup>319</sup> ÍF 4, 72; 97; 113 (in this instance we never learn what Snorri and Steinþórr were discussing).

<sup>320</sup> ÍF 4, 40; 46–7; 49; 109; 118–9.

<sup>321</sup> ÍF 4, 86: 'I do not wish to risk my standing for the sake of your ill-will and injustice.'

burgeoning political reputation at this stage in the saga. I have shown that *Eyrbyggja saga* vastly downplays the worst aspects of Styrr's personality and following the deaths of Þórólfr and Styrr at the close of the saga Snorri is finally established enough in his own right to face down an *ójafnaðarmaðr* in the usual way.

Snorri's three encounters with *ójafnaðarmenn* thus mark watersheds in his life: his defeat of Arnkell, his marriage, his move to Tunga and his acknowledgement as a regional power to be reckoned with. *Ójafnaðarmenn* in some cases are easily defeated and their defeat brings the wealth of their lands (or sometimes a relative's hand in marriage) to the saga's heroes. The *ójafnaðarmenn* in *Eyrbyggja saga* benefit Snorri *goði* in a slightly different way, however. By temporarily allying himself with Þórólfr and by connecting himself to Styrr, Snorri is able to piggyback onto the achievements of these characters, taking advantage first of Þórólfr's rich (if ill-gotten) landholdings and then of Styrr's formidable reputation for violence. Similarly, by organising the attack on Óspakr, Snorri demonstrates his competence and trustworthiness to his new neighbours in Sælingsdalur.

In its complex structure, *Eyrbyggja saga* covers many more episodes besides those concerning the *ójafnaðarmenn* of course, some of which are related to Snorri's increasing power and status (such as the events at Mávahlíð and the dispute with Vigfúss í Drápahlíð), some of which are only tenuously related to Snorri (such as the hauntings at Fróðá and the possessed bull Glæsir). Nevertheless, nearly every one of these events is linked back to Snorri in one way or another, although we see things from his perspective only intermittently. By repressing Snorri's point of view, forcing the audience to largely see him only through the eyes of others and intertwining his ascent to power with characters who are described in terms conventionally used of antagonists and disruptive figures, *Eyrbyggja saga* creates a saga hero to confuse and confound us. Snorri maintains the air of inscrutability the saga's early description gives him; we see him externally via the physical features ascribed to him there, but, much like Lönnroth's observations regarding the villains of sagas, we do not often see Snorri at home, doing domestic, familiar activities.<sup>322</sup> This can have the effect of making the traditionally heroic Arnkell more relatable, but as the saga itself notes, when all his enemies had died, the way was clear for Snorri's power to increase. *Eyrbyggja saga* shows various disputes largely from the perspective of characters other than Snorri, but as Snorri eventually triumphs over the other characters narrative space is made for him to step into the role of protagonist, closing the saga at last with a descriptive deluge of his high-status descendants.

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<sup>322</sup> Lönnroth, 'Rhetorical Persuasion', pp. 178; 185.

### 3.ii: Placement and pacing

Because of its structural idiosyncrasies, *Eyrbyggja saga* can offer suggestions as to how narrative triggers are deployed in the *Íslendingasögur*. Taking land, life and property with violent or underhanded means, these *ójafnaðarmenn* contribute to shifting political dynamics both in life and through their deaths; as we will see, this is true of virtually every *ójafnaðarmaðr* in the *Íslendingasögur*. In this section I examine all the other sagas and *ójafnaðarmenn* listed in Chapter 2, categorising them by broad narrative function. In the three examples from *Eyrbyggja saga* we can already see the different use these narrative triggers may be put to and how the way in which they are introduced and the stage of the narrative at which it is done both help to establish their role.

Like Óspakr, many *ójafnaðarmenn* can be found at new beginnings; although this is more obviously the case when the ‘new beginning’ in question coincides with the start of the saga itself. In this position there are various ways in which they have the potential to become narrative triggers, first, by directly influencing the course of the entire narrative that follows, either as characters themselves or because their deaths spark a chain of events off. Otherwise they influence the narrative for a brief time, functioning in a self-contained scenario to either tell us something about the protagonists who are involved in the continuing narrative or to establish social, geographical or other circumstances necessary for the following events. *Ójafnaðarmenn* who are introduced into a conflict that is already present (when introduced later on in the saga), function differently again, because at this point their role tends rather to involve bringing the existing story to its climax.

Pórólfur and Styrr are introduced well before they may be said to fulfil any sort of catalysing function, and the same delaying technique is observable in examples from *Vatnsdæla saga* and *Harðar saga* below. By and large, despite this delay, these examples conform to the same patterns of outcome as those without the delay; in regionally-minded sagas such as *Eyrbyggja saga* and *Vatnsdæla saga* there is often a strong impulse to introduce as many characters as possible in the opening set up of the district’s inhabitants. Other factors are more idiosyncratic and must be explained on a case by case basis, as with Styrr’s portrayal in *Eyrbyggja saga*.

The remaining sixteen *ójafnaðarmenn* are here categorised by their placement in saga narrative, and the type of catalysing function they have. These types have been split into four, reflecting the position of the *ójafnaðarmenn*. In 3.ii.a I discuss three examples of characters who are introduced early, whose disruptiveness sparks a conflict (or chain of conflicts) that lasts throughout the saga. 3.ii.b and 3.ii.c cover characters introduced early in the saga who appear to have a more limited effect on the narrative and whose role can vary: sometimes it is to incite a particular sort of protagonist to action (3.ii.b), but sometimes it is an episode that simply introduces us to the

behaviour and relationships of other characters in practice (3.ii.c). These examples are the most common and therefore the most idiosyncratic, as each character plays a role particular to the saga containing it. Finally, 3.ii.d groups the characters who are introduced later in a saga in order to force an end to proceedings that could otherwise continue indefinitely. Throughout these sections I will weave in relevant references to other disruptive qualities listed at 2.ii.d above.

### *3.ii.a: Defining the saga's conflict*

This section begins with the shortest and simplest text to feature the introduction of an *ójafnaðarmaðr*. *Þorsteins þáttr stangarhöggs* is not long enough to be thought of as episodic and is not incorporated into any longer accounts of Bjarni Brodd-Helgason's life, so it may be viewed as a saga in miniature for the purposes of this study. However, not all saga narratives are as straightforward as *Þorsteins þáttr stangarhöggs*. The two sagas discussed afterwards may be thought of as less sophisticated than many, yet they are still lengthier stories than the *þáttr*, with larger casts and more potential for variation on the figure of the narrative catalyst. These two sagas where the narrative's entire arc of conflict can still be traced back to an *ójafnaðarmaðr* introduced towards the beginning of the text are traditionally considered late examples of the form: *Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings* and *Þórðar saga hreðu*.<sup>323</sup> The former introduces an *ójafnaðarmaðr* within the first few lines, and the latter within the first chapters; one is a chieftain who initiates as much disruption in life as is caused by attempts to get vengeance for his death, whereas it is specifically the death of the other and efforts to obtain vengeance for him that drive the ensuing plot. The example from *Þorsteins þáttr* has more in common with the character in *Þórðar saga*; dying early at the hands of an unlikely hero and sparking retaliation from the *ójafnaðarmaðr*'s more powerful patrons.

#### ***Þorsteins þáttr stangarhöggs***

*Þorsteins þáttr* has been regarded as both a saga in miniature,<sup>324</sup> and an episode in the life of the chieftain Bjarni Brodd-Helgason, to be appreciated alongside *Vápnfirðinga saga*.<sup>325</sup> Within the first few lines of the *þáttr* we are introduced to an *ójafnaðarmaðr*, Þórðr hrossamaðr: 'Þórðr er maðr

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<sup>323</sup> For discussions of the popularity of and academic response to these sagas, especially regarding their age, see: Guðni Jónsson, 'Formáli', ÍF 6, pp. lxxxix–xc; Ward, 'Nested Narrative', pp. 18–21.

<sup>324</sup> In Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking* and Andersson, *Analytic Reading*.

<sup>325</sup> As suggested by Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, p. 307.

nefndr. Hann var húskarl Bjarna frá Hofi. Hann varðveitti reiðhesta Bjarna, því at hann var kallaðr hrossamaðr. Þórðr var ójafnaðarmaðr mikill, ok lét hann marga þess ok kenna, er hann var ríkismanns húskarl. En eigi var hann sjálfr at meira verðr, ok eigi varð hann at vinsælli.<sup>326</sup> Þórðr's introduction follows those of the protagonist Þorsteinn Þórarinnsson and his father, whose only wealth is in their stud horses. At a horse fight Þórðr hits Þorsteinn with the goad and Þorsteinn is later belittled by Bjarni's other workmen for letting him get away with this; under pressure from his father, Þorsteinn takes action and kills Þórðr. Similarly under pressure from the wagging tongues of his householders, Bjarni has Þorsteinn outlawed, but some of the workers continue to gossip so Bjarni suggests that they kill Þorsteinn. They fail and are killed themselves, forcing Bjarni to travel to Þorsteinn's farm in person to fight a lengthy, evenly matched duel with him. Þorsteinn realises what folly it would be for someone of his status to kill a chieftain like Bjarni and accepts Bjarni's offer to take over Þorsteinn's farm and take him under his protection. The story closes with praise for Bjarni and a list of his descendants.

Without Þórðr nothing would happen to justify this short tale: Þórðr strikes Þorsteinn because he is the kind of petty bully who does not play fair. In other words, as we already know him to be, Þórðr is an *ójafnaðarmaðr*. Without the *ójafnaðarmaðr* there would be no humiliating blow, and no need for Þorsteinn to seek revenge and come to the attention of Bjarni. Þórðr's actions and his death at Þorsteinn's hands define the conflict of the entire narrative: both Þorsteinn and Bjarni inadvertently receive benefits from the fact that Þórðr behaves with *ójafnaðr*: Bjarni gets Þorsteinn's land and Þorsteinn himself as a member of his retinue, whilst Þorsteinn gains respect and standing previously out of his reach.<sup>327</sup> As in the case of Þórólfr and Snorri goði, Þórðr's disruption forces Bjarni's hand but ultimately costs him little.

Public opinion is an important feature of the disruption caused by Þórðr: his act of aggression was committed in a public place and the gossip of Bjarni's workmen finally forces both Þorsteinn and Bjarni's hands. Þorsteinn's father plays a role in this too, by shaming his son into action. Yet the *þáttr* is not altogether approving of the opinions of these onlookers; Bjarni and Þorsteinn act on their words (Bjarni admittedly by telling his workers to put their money where their mouths are and attack Þorsteinn themselves), but ultimately both reach their own compromise by ending their duel peacefully. The force and authority of the onlookers' words is greatly diminished

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<sup>326</sup> ÍF 11, 69: 'Þórðr is the name of a man. He was a man in the service of Bjarni from Hof. He took care of Bjarni's riding horses, and that was why he was called hrossamaðr. Þórðr was a very inequitable man and he wanted to let everyone know that he was in the service of a powerful man. But he himself was not worth much, and he was not popular.'

<sup>327</sup> ÍF 11, 77–8.

by the fact that in the end Bjarni is confident enough to set aside the deaths of his men and Þorsteinn is confident enough to ignore the opinion of his father. As with Snorri goði's leisurely approach to the problems caused by Óspakr (and Arnkell), there is an acknowledgement that public opinion needs to be recognised without necessarily being followed to the letter. As we shall see, this is an important variable in the cases of all *ójafnaðarmenn*.

### ***Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings***

*Hávarðar saga* wastes no time in informing us of its *ójafnaðarmaðr*'s essential contribution as a narrative catalyst: its opening words are '[þ]at er upphaf þessarar sögu, at Þorbjörn hét maðr'.<sup>328</sup> Þorbjörn's character is introduced (he is a chieftain who abuses his position by taking women from other households to be his mistresses), before Hávarðr and his family are introduced. Hávarðr is old, but was a viking in his youth; unlike Þórólfr bægifótr in *Eyrbyggja saga* this must be to his credit because it is grouped with positive attributes rather than negative ones.<sup>329</sup> The rest of the opening chapter details the other characters who will be involved in the saga in a more concise manner than is common and links various other unsavoury individuals such as Ljótr á Mánabergi and Vagr Þórdísarson to Þorbjörn by kinship. To emphasise Þorbjörn's villainy further we are reminded just before the narrative is picked up of the fact that he is *ójafnaðr*: 'Þorbjörn vildi þat ekki ok sýndi þar um enn ójafnað sinn'.<sup>330</sup>

The scenes that follow are all familiar ones designed to show Hávarðr's son Óláfr in the best possible light: accomplished shepherding; flirting with Þorbjörn's mistress Sigríðr; a revenant fight; combat with other trouble-makers; and finally an heroically ill-equipped last stand against overwhelming odds. This ends on a surprisingly brutal note when Þorbjörn removes several of the dead man's teeth to keep for the further incitement of his enemies later in the saga. When Þorbjörn returns Óláfr's teeth to Hávarðr at the Alþingi it is the final straw in a line of provocations leading up to Hávarðr's revenge. Up until this point, Þorbjörn's arrogance has persisted and references to his being *ójafnaðr* abounded, meaning that the only delay in the progression of the saga has been Hávarðr's age and reluctance.<sup>331</sup> By the time Þorbjörn hits the old man with his son's teeth, we already anticipate the hero's imminent retaliation.

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<sup>328</sup> ÍF 6, 291: 'It is the beginning of this saga, that there was a man named Þorbjörn'.

<sup>329</sup> ÍF 6, 292.

<sup>330</sup> ÍF 6, 294: 'Þorbjörn didn't want that, and it showed his inequitable behaviour'.

<sup>331</sup> ÍF 6, 312–4.

Following Hávarðr's revenge, the saga introduces another brother of Þorbjörn, Holmgöngu-Ljótr, who is 'said to be' an *ójafnaðarmaðr* as well: '[e]r svá sagt, at Ljótr var inn mesti ójafnaðarmaðr'.<sup>332</sup> Ljótr's narrative role echoes Þorbjörn's but is not a direct continuation of it, because he does not get a chance to seek vengeance against Hávarðr. Ljótr is guilty of his own crimes for which he is brought to justice by the two young boys Þorsteinn and Grímr Þorbjarnarson. To an extent, this incident is the opposite of Hávarðr's struggle with Þorbjörn, where he feels his son's death is unwarranted, but maunders and dithers, waiting for others to encourage him to action against a younger, fitter opponent. The boys instead feel that their father is being bullied and they take swift, decisive action against a much older man. Ljótr's *ójafnaðr* and his death serve only to bring the Þorbjarnarsynir into Hávarðr's sphere, so that they are all together in the motley alliance that defends themselves against yet another brother of the *ójafnaðarmenn* later in the saga. In this sense, Ljótr can be compared with the *ójafnaðarmenn* in the diffuse category described below in 3.ii.c: he is a catalyst for the narrative arc concerned with the Þorbjarnarsynir in the same way that Þorbjörn Þjóðreksson is presented as the catalyst for the narrative concerned with Hávarðr (which is the majority of the saga itself).

The distinct triggering moment in Þorbjörn's actions is his theft of Óláfr's sheep. Previous to this, his actions have been uncharitable and ungrateful and at times slanderous where Óláfr is concerned, but nothing incites a reaction until the sheep theft brings Óláfr onto Þorbjörn's farm. With Óláfr at hand, and dead soon afterwards, Þorbjörn has begun the chain of events that will result in the slow process of vengeance that Hávarðr embarks upon throughout the rest of the saga; the blow at the Alþingi with the bag full of Óláfr's teeth was a calculated brutality that prevents Hávarðr from backing out at this point in the plot. The saga closes with a *mannjafnaðr* for all the battles contained within its narrative, during which neither Þorbjörn nor Holmgöngu-Ljótr is eligible for compensation, explicitly because both were *ójafnaðarmenn*.<sup>333</sup>

### ***Þórðar saga hreðu***

For different reasons to *Hávarðar saga*, *Þórðar saga* is also generally seen to be somewhat unsatisfactory in terms of style; in its case apparently because many of its conflicts result in

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<sup>332</sup> ÍF 6, 336. Although his introduction is framed as a general opinion rather than that of the narrator, Ljótr does not conform to the broad trends of characters introduced in this manner (4.i). In this case I think *er svá sagt* functions as the bald opinion of the narrator.

<sup>333</sup> ÍF 6, 353.



disquietingly peaceful resolutions.<sup>334</sup> This impression is in no way due to the actions of the saga's resident *ójafnaðarmaðr*, however, who is typical in his aggressive pursuit of a woman who he has no claim on and in his sneering disregard for social niceties. Ormr Þorsteinsson is introduced in chapter 5 (ÍF 14) and is the nephew of the most powerful chieftain in the narrative, Miðfjarðar-Skeggi (see also 2.ii.b). In no time at all, he has antagonised the generally patient Þórðr hreða beyond forgiveness (by attempting to seduce Þórðr's sister, who has already been promised to Ormr's brother, Ásbjörn), and he is dead before chapter 6 begins. Contrary to Elisabeth I. Ward's view of the character, Ormr is one of the few predictable elements of the saga:

Ormur is here depicted as not just somewhat dishonorable—even the major saga heroes have moments when they behave poorly—but the complete disrespect for a brotherly bond sets him so far outside of the norm of behavior as to stretch credulity. [...] Because the character of Ormur is hardly believable, the drama of the story, which in many sagas is based on a feeling of historical veracity, falls apart.<sup>335</sup>

Indeed, speaking in terms of typical saga narrative as opposed to historical veracity, our credulity should be stretched rather by the magnanimity of Þórðr, who spares an assassin's life twice before finally killing him in self-defence.

Prior to Ormr's appearance, the saga's protagonists had reached an uneasy accord and had the prospect of peace on the horizon, in the form of a marriage alliance between Þórðr's sister and Skeggi's nephew. Before Ormr arrives we know of Skeggi's instant dislike of Þórðr and how it was fuelled by the fact that Skeggi's son Eiðr was rescued by Þórðr and chose him as his foster-father. We also know that Eiðr hopes for peace between these two paternal figures and that peace seems guaranteed with the wedding that will occur when Ásbjörn next returns from abroad. The introduction of Ormr makes it blindingly obvious that this situation will not last: he is a relative of Ásbjörn and Skeggi, so we know that certain obligations of support or vengeance exist between them and him. Ormr is next described as physically powerful, arrogant and an *ójafnaðarmaðr*; thus there is no doubt that he will disrupt the peace and in doing so bring Skeggi into matters. The first sentence after Ormr's introduction is his meeting with Sigríðr, Þórðr's sister, and we now have the means by which Ormr will prove to be a catalyst for conflict: by unbalancing the agreement between Þórðr and Skeggi.

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<sup>334</sup> See Ward, 'Nested Narrative', ch. 1 *passim*. for a summary of this type of response.

<sup>335</sup> Ward, 'Nested Narrative', p. 17.

Many typical feud scenarios such as this do not come to fruition in *Þórðar saga* (for instance, Þórðr's reaction to the death of his ally Þórhallr is not to seek vengeance as one might expect), but in this case the saga follows several attempts at vengeance on behalf of Ormr. First his business partner Indriði attacks Þórðr, followed by Skeggi's brother-in-law Özurr, who is killed on his third attempt on Þórðr's life, before finally Ásbjörn returns and he and Skeggi launch another attack on Þórðr. It is unsuccessful and only on Þórðr's instigation of a retaliatory raid is Eiðr finally able to ensure a lasting peace (although even this is briefly shaken by the appearance of another uncle of Ormr, a duellist called Sörli, who Þórðr dispatches quickly and pays compensation for). It is telling that the battle that brings the main conflict to a close is a rare example of one initiated by Þórðr himself: the saga is not subtle about his might and honour outstripping everyone else's.

In these two sagas in which curmudgeonly old men are the heroes, the *ójafnaðarmenn* catalyse the disputes that underpin the whole of both narratives. Both are implicated in inappropriate courting practices and both display a haughty disregard for the opinions of others; both are from high-status backgrounds and are supported by their kinsmen and allies. Although Ward's response to Ormr mistakenly judged him to be unusual, she is right in that his bad behaviour is exaggerated, as is that of Þorbjörn, who is made into something of a pantomime villain. Extreme delineations between 'good' and 'evil' are associated with later texts, or with those that have seen heavy influence from other genres, and these black and white interpretations of character are consequently seen as a regrettable feature of the *Íslendingasögur* that display them.<sup>336</sup> These two *ójafnaðarmenn* have no redeeming features, so modern audiences likely feel that a conflict based upon the defensibility of their actions is a particularly flat, empty basis for a saga narrative; although this is not necessarily the case when the individual is a catalyst for a particular episode or for the downfall of a great hero, as will be shown below.

### 3.ii.b: Episodic conflicts – defining the hero

This section and the following one for the most part cover the disposable *ójafnaðarmenn* of the *Íslendingasögur*: those whose lasting impact on the narrative of the saga as a whole is discreet or minimal. Generally found in the first chapters of a saga, these characters can be divided very loosely into two types: those discussed in this section, whose deaths contribute towards the development of a hero; and those whose involvement early on in a narrative offers us a preview of the relationships

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<sup>336</sup> Vésteinn Ólason, 'Family Sagas', p. 108.

and power-structures that will define the following saga story (3.ii.c). There is an overlap between these types, depending to a degree upon the focus of the saga. For example, if it is the saga of a discernible hero or individual then we might feel that the *ójafnaðarmaðr* has a more personal impact on them than if the story is more concerned with a district or family, where the impact of the *ójafnaðarmaðr* would be couched in terms of social or political circumstances. Yet often in defining the protagonist it is impossible to separate the hero from the saga as a whole; these *ójafnaðarmenn* can also be considered to overlap somewhat with those discussed above (3.ii.a) and even in a regional saga a distinct protagonist may still be discerned, as in *Eyrbyggja saga*. I have divided the groups as far as is possible therefore, into sagas with individual ‘heroes’ which are discussed here (*Bárðar saga*, *Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls*, *Króka-Refs saga*) and those with a more dispersed focus on regions or multiple protagonists, which are addressed at 3.ii.c.

### ***Bárðar saga Snæfellsáss***

To some extent, the *ójafnaðarmenn* of *Bárðar saga* and *Gunnars saga* may be considered exceptional, as neither saga has them initiate conflict in quite the same ostentatious manner as is conventional in the *Íslendingasögur*. The actions of Þorkell Rauðfeldarson in *Bárðar saga* could hardly be deemed inequitable in any normal social setting: when his sons play a prank on his half-brother Bárðr’s daughter and push her away to Greenland on an ice-floe, Bárðr takes the boys and casts them to their deaths. Understandably, Þorkell is upset by this and goes to visit Bárðr, whereupon the two of them begin fighting. Bárðr’s superior strength sees him victorious over his brother, who limps away with a broken leg. On his next appearance we are told: ‘þeir bræðr hafi fundizt ok sættz helium sáttum, Bárðr ok Þorkell; áttu þeir síðan mörg skipti saman ok höfðu löngum samvistir saman í Brynjudal í helli þeim, er Bárðarhellir er kallaðr síðan.’<sup>337</sup> The saga’s final mention of Þorkell is his presence at the wedding of Tungu-Oddr and Þórdís Bárðardóttir.

He is thus unusual in that his aggression towards Bárðr is justified — it cannot be said from the way the saga recounts matters that the actions of Þorkell’s sons are directly his fault — and for the fact that he is rehabilitated by the saga. At one point he is said to be a shape-shifter (*hamrammr mjök*),<sup>338</sup> but following the fight with Bárðr his human nature might be said to win out, as from then onwards he is known only as Þorkell bundinfóti and his connection to the giant Rauðfeldr is laid aside. This shift in nature might explain the fact that he is ‘cured’ of being *ójafnaðr*, even though the

<sup>337</sup> ÍF 13, 129: ‘the brothers Bárðr and Þorkell had met and fully reconciled; afterwards they had many dealings together and lived together for a long time in Brynjudalur in a cave that was called Bárðarhellir afterwards.’

<sup>338</sup> ÍF 13, 118.

quality is elsewhere connected very much with the human rather than the supernatural; perhaps, as Ármann Jakobsson has suggested, this is a symptom of the jealousy the supernatural creatures in *Bárðar saga* feel of humans and their ability to continue their lines.<sup>339</sup> The human version of Porkell is more successful than the giant version.

The place of Bárðr's reconciliation with Porkell within the narrative has been accounted for because it explains the place-name Bárðarhellir: '[t]his trivial information, completely unnecessary for the saga's unfolding, is obviously aimed at those interested in the regional history of the Hrútafjörður area.'<sup>340</sup> Yet Porkell's earlier dealings with his half-brother have a more significant impact on the saga, even if Porkell himself does not start them. Bárðr's fight with Porkell tells us about both the emotional, human aspects of his nature (his care for his lost daughter and anger at those who cross him) and about his inhuman side (unnatural strength), it begins the story of Helga Bárðardóttir and her adventures in Greenland and it is ultimately the reason for Bárðr's decision to leave human society and retreat to Snæfell. Additionally, as noted, it shifts Porkell from the supernatural realm to the realm of chronicles and tangible descendants.<sup>341</sup> For these reasons Ármann Jakobsson calls this conflict 'unique in the saga', and therefore despite Porkell's differences from other characters introduced as *ójafnaðarmenn* he is still involved in an essential moment of plot-triggering narrative.<sup>342</sup>

### ***Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfífls***

Similarly in *Gunnars saga* the hero's nemeses, the Þorgrímssynir, do not make the first serious move in their conflict with Gunnarr. Like Þorbjörn in *Hávarðar saga* they are introduced in the opening lines, following which the saga introduces the hero's family. Gunnarr is a *kolbítr* (male Cinderella, lit. 'coal-biter'), doubted by all until he proves himself in combat by beating the Þorgrímssynir's slave, Svartr, and casting him down at his owner's feet hard enough to break his back.<sup>343</sup> Prior to this the Þorgrímssynir taunted Gunnarr as a fool and behaved high-handedly throughout the games they participate in, but the saga also tells us that 'hyggja Þorgrímssynir gott

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<sup>339</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, 'Bárðar saga and its Giants', p. 15.

<sup>340</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, 'History of the Trolls?', p. 57.

<sup>341</sup> ÍF 1, 352.

<sup>342</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, 'History of the Trolls?', p. 63.

<sup>343</sup> ÍF 14, 347; an alternative motivation for the antipathy between Gunnarr and Þorgrím's family is given by a different manuscript of the saga, which details Gunnarr's advances on Þorgrím's daughter Helga (ÍF 14, pp. 346–7, n. 1).

til' during the scene.<sup>344</sup> The insults are not delivered as part of a charged situation (as is the case in *Víga-Glúms saga* when Bárðr insults Vigfúss: 3.ii.d), so Gunnarr's reaction feels rather disproportionate at this stage of the narrative. Indeed, later in the saga Þorgrímr gives his sons a warning that makes Gunnarr seem more like the trouble-maker in this narrative: 'vildi eg, að það legðist af að eiga við þá bræðr.'<sup>345</sup>

Having established their mutual dislike at the games the narrative builds on this. Þorgrímr behaves in a manner typical of arrogant chieftains by trying to monopolise the sales of a newly arrived tradesman, Bárðr.<sup>346</sup> Gunnarr's brother Helgi invites Bárðr into their home against Þorgrímr's orders and this prompts Jökull Þorgrímsson to lead an attack on Gunnarr. It is following this attack (in which thirteen of Jökull's men are killed by Gunnarr alone) that Þorgrímr tells his sons to avoid Gunnarr. The stakes have now become too high for either side to stop, however, as public opinion drives the conflict onwards: 'þótti öllum þeir hafa mikið í fang færzt' is the reaction to the brothers' support of Bárðr, whilst Jökull tells his father '[e]kki dugir ófreistað'.<sup>347</sup> The Þorgrímssynir are soon killed by Gunnarr, although the manner in which this occurs is fairly ignominious: both brothers are apparently foolish enough to be lured outside and killed on their doorstep. Gunnarr and Helgi soon make good their escape from Iceland with Bárðr and whilst they are away Þorgrímr dies of grief.<sup>348</sup>

The rest of the saga is a series of events involving trolls, Norwegian adventures and material that might all be associated with coming-of-age tales.<sup>349</sup> In a sense, as with *Bárðar saga*, we can still draw a connection between the section of the narrative concerned with the *ójafnaðarmenn* and the ensuing part of the plot; after all, Gunnarr and Helgi would not necessarily have left Iceland and embarked upon their adventures had it not been for the dispute with the Þorgrímssynir. They, alongside Bárðr Snæfellsáss, are more proactive in the face of characters we are told are *ójafnaðarmenn*, which is likely indicative of a difference in generic conventions as much as age of composition. Neither saga is much concerned with political machinations or legal strife, so the justification for having a problem with an unpleasant neighbour or family member does not need to be as clear-cut as in a saga where feud, power-play and politics drives the plot.

<sup>344</sup> ÍF 14, 346: 'the Þorgrímssynir were pleased with matters'.

<sup>345</sup> ÍF 14, 354: 'I would appreciate it if you left off your dealings with the brothers.'

<sup>346</sup> Cf. Tungu-Oddr in *Hænsa-Póris saga* and Guðmundr ríki in *Ljósventninga saga*: Andersson and Miller, *Law and Literature*, pp. 67–8.

<sup>347</sup> ÍF 14, 352; 354: 'everyone thought they had taken on a great matter in this'; 'doing nothing won't help'.

<sup>348</sup> ÍF 14, 374.

<sup>349</sup> Regarding travel as a part of these stories, see Larrington, 'Awkward Adolescents', p. 146.

## *Króka-Refs saga*

*Króka-Refs saga* has elements in common with these two sagas: like Gunnarr, Refr is a *kolbíttr*. His first deed is to kill the saga's *ójafnaðarmaðr* rather than the *ójafnaðarmaðr*'s slave, however, so in this way the character may be seen to fulfil the narrative function of 'catalysing' or 'triggering' the hero from his lazy, socially useless childhood into his competent, adult self. The saga opens without much of a prelude to Refr's story: he and his family are introduced and immediately afterwards so is Þorbjörn, kinless but for his wife Rannveig and described as an *ójafnaðarmaðr* who has been driven all over the land for his killings and refusal to pay compensation.<sup>350</sup>

The beginnings of a dispute are set up when Þorbjörn lets his animals stray into the hayfields of his neighbour, Steinn, who is Refr's father. Yet Steinn behaves unusually, telling Þorbjörn that despite his lack of popularity, Steinn wishes to give him the benefit of the doubt and resolve matters in a reasonable way; and in exchange 'þar sem ek er engi skröksmaðr, at til verði einnhverr at trúa mínum orðum, þeir er þik deili málum; má ek þá slíkt fram bera, at eigi hefir þú mér sýnt ójafnað eða mitt með röngu ágirntz.'<sup>351</sup> This harks back to the notion discussed above whereby the quality of *ójafnaðr* is a targeted form of aggression (3.i.b); Steinn claims that he does not feel targeted by Þorbjörn's inequitable behaviour (despite the fact that his crops are damaged because of it). By maintaining that the problem must rather be negligence or accident he offers Þorbjörn a different path of action. Þorbjörn takes it and he and Steinn remain on good terms until Steinn's death (at the beginning of chapter 2, ÍF 14), at which point Steinn's wife, Þorgerðr, cannot bring herself to take her husband's advice and move away from the *ójafnaðarmaðr*. Her approaches to Þorbjörn are not recounted in direct speech and although she appears to behave as reasonably as her husband did, it is apparent that Þorbjörn will make no more concessions.

Typically, Þorbjörn makes the first aggressive move and kills the man assigned to keep his livestock from the fields belonging to Þorgerðr and Refr. Refr's mother addresses her son with a *hvøt* and he is spurred to action, immediately leaving for Þorbjörn's farm and killing him in his bed-closet for his refusal to offer adequate compensation.<sup>352</sup> Unlike Gunnarr, Refr does not leave Iceland immediately, so this event cannot be said to spur the rest of the saga's plot in exactly the same manner. Nevertheless, in order for the saga to have a plot something must spur the *kolbíttr* into action, in this case the unacceptable actions of an *ójafnaðarmaðr*. Refr's ensuing adventures involve

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<sup>350</sup> 2.ii.c, p. 55.

<sup>351</sup> ÍF 14, 120: 'because I am not a deceitful man, anyone might believe my words who you have shared quarrels with; I must testify that you have not behaved inequitably towards me, or unjustly coveted my goods.'

<sup>352</sup> ÍF 14, 124–5.

a vengeance-fuelled (if one-sided) dispute with the family of Þorgils Víkarskalli (an *ódældarmaðr*),<sup>353</sup> in this it is a narrative that adheres to a more familiar social setting than the ones found in *Bárðar saga* or *Gunnars saga*.

The *ójafnaðarmaðr* of the saga is thus of a more common type, unscrupulous in his deeds when it is necessary for something to inspire Refr to action. In this he is reminiscent of the Esphœlingar Sigmundr and Þorkell in *Víga-Glúms saga*, whose behaviour (defined as *ójafnaðr* by Glúmr's mother) is *kolbíttr* Glúmr's first challenge (see 3.ii.d). Refr, unlike Glúmr, has not been challenged or trained in Norway beforehand though, which serves as a reminder that his tale is more astonishing and fantastic than Glúmr's. The distinction between these sagas' beginnings seems to centre on the building of tension; there is no build-up to the conflict between Bárðr and Þorkell (nor to its resolution), nor to Gunnarr's first encounter with the Þorgrímssynir. There is a small amount of build-up in *Króka-Refs saga* as we know the situation between Steinþinn and Þorbjörn, but it nevertheless escalates quickly; the conflict between Glúmr and his enemies over the field Vitazgjafi might be described in Andersson's terms as displaying 'retardation' to a far greater extent than the other saga openings.<sup>354</sup> This technique, which gives an impression of a more sophisticated narrative, has been observed in *Eyrbyggja saga*'s early introduction to Þórólfr in particular.

### 3.ii.c: Episodic conflicts — defining the nature of a dispute

The *ójafnaðarmenn* of the first two sagas discussed under this heading (*Reykðæla saga* and *Fóstbræðra saga*) may be said to contribute to the set up of the politics and relationships of the saga as a whole, or to show the potential of the protagonists under different circumstances. Both of these sagas also feature important individuals who are described in the obfuscating way of *hann var engi/ekki/litill jafnaðarmaðr* and the larger role played by these disruptive figures affects the portrayal and narrative effectiveness of the other *ójafnaðarmenn*. Although this kind of characterisation is discussed in more detail in Chapter 4, these particular individuals from *Reykðæla saga* and *Fóstbræðra saga* will be briefly discussed here for their significance to the narrative as a whole. The *ójafnaðarmenn* introduced explicitly as such appear early in these two sagas and in both cases are out of the narrative shortly afterwards; Ingólfr and his family are dead at the hands of *Fóstbræðra saga*'s heroes and Eysteinn Mánason seemingly by his own hand in *Reykðæla saga*.

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<sup>353</sup> ÍF 14, 132.

<sup>354</sup> Andersson, *Analytic Reading*, pp. 40–1.

## *Reykðæla saga*

Eysteinn is introduced amongst the other early settlers, immediately after the saga's central family is introduced; he and Áskell goði Eyvindarson first encounter each other during a case brought against Eysteinn for the unlawful taking of wood from a neighbour (who is foster-father to one of Áskell's nephews). The case is resolved in a manner reminiscent of the case that Snorri goði takes on for Þórólfr bægifótr in *Eyrbyggja saga*: '[eigi] kvazk Eysteinn optar skyldu leggja undir Áskel sitt mál. Ekki talði Áskell at því.'<sup>355</sup>

Following this, Eysteinn's refusal to honour transactions gets him into a duel with Áskell's nephew Þorsteinn, during which he is injured but survives. The next incident in the saga is presented without elaboration: 'þar gerðisk vinátta mikill' ('then a great friendship grew up') between Eysteinn and another of Áskell's nephews called Háls, but within a few lines of text Eysteinn is plotting to have Háls framed for the theft of Eysteinn's sheep.<sup>356</sup> The deception is successful for a time and Áskell refuses to support Háls despite his protestations of innocence, but by a stroke of luck the agent of the trick, Björn, is recovered from Norway by Háls during his outlawry. Áskell now agrees to the case and Eysteinn, having been warned of his involvement, chooses to burn down his household and all his property, possibly including himself, rather than hand over anything in compensation.

This episode may be read as a warning both to the audience and to Áskell: his nephews will bring him trouble. Whilst Áskell is powerful enough to tackle Eysteinn and sensible enough to know when not to take a case on without evidence, his unpleasant relatives will ultimately be his downfall. One of these is yet another nephew, Vémundr kǫgurr, whose role is 'to set in motion a sequence of events which impact on and trouble his kinsmen repeatedly.'<sup>357</sup> It is indeed no surprise to see that when Vémundr (who is named in chapter 1 and involved from then onwards) is finally given a description in chapter 4, the saga tells us: 'Vémundr var engi jafnaðarmaðr kallaðr'.<sup>358</sup> An *ójafnaðarmaðr* outside the family is one thing; the implication of there being *ójafnaðr* within the protagonist's family is another situation entirely. Unlike *Eyrbyggja saga*, which hides the worst excesses of Snorri's in-law Styrr from us, *Reykðæla saga* shows in gloomy detail that no matter how forbearing Áskell is he cannot stop Vémundr from continuing to make enemies.<sup>359</sup>

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<sup>355</sup> ÍF 10, 153: 'Eysteinn said he would not place his cases in Áskell's hands again. Áskell said nothing to this.'

<sup>356</sup> ÍF 10, 155–6.

<sup>357</sup> Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues with the Viking Age*, p. 143.

<sup>358</sup> ÍF 10, 160: 'Vémundr was not known as an equitable man'.

<sup>359</sup> Cf. Óláfr pái's interactions with his half-brother Þorleikr Hǫskuldsson in *Laxdæla saga*: 4.i.



The only other instance of *ójafnaðr* (expressed by reported opinion only) in *Reykðæla saga* comes after Áskell's death in 'an appended episode' within a 'digression' concerning Glúmr and Þorkell Geirason.<sup>360</sup> The death of Þorsteinn varastafr is said to be a case of *landhreinsan* ('land-cleansing')<sup>361</sup> and the role of *ójafnaðarmenn* in land-cleansing is discussed more fully with regards to *Vatnsdæla saga* below. The narrative position of the land-cleansing is significant in that it divides the saga between Áskell's career and that of his son, Víga-Skúta. The roles of Eysteinn and Vémundr kǫgurr are similarly important, with Eysteinn serving to establish Áskell's character and the kind of disputes that he will face, whilst Vémundr's pursuance of a series of ever-increasing disputes results in Áskell's death and thus inspires Skúta to take revenge in the latter part of the saga.

### ***Fóstbræðra saga***

In *Fóstbræðra saga* the *ójafnaðarmaðr* Ingólfr sviðinn and his family are not the first trouble-makers in the narrative, nor can their *ójafnaðr* be said to target the protagonists Þormóðr Bersason and Þorgeirr Hávarsson. Compared to the other sagas discussed in this section, *Fóstbræðra saga* is the only one which might be thought to have a heroic protagonist (or protagonists) who dominates the narrative in the way that Refr and Gunnarr do, yet there is no danger of mistaking the foster-brothers for *kolbítar*. Indeed, an early aside from the saga warns us: 'tölðu margir þá ekki vera jafnaðarmenn.'<sup>362</sup> Thus, as with Vémundr kǫgurr, characters that are considered by the community to be *ójafnaðr* are the focus of much of the narrative. Unlike *Reykðæla saga*, however, this is the story of their downfall rather than the downfall of their greatest ally (Vémundr just fades out of *Reykðæla saga* after his uncle's death, apparently no longer necessary to the plot).<sup>363</sup> This shift in perspective means that the foster-brothers are presented in a more heroic light than Vémundr generally is; thus they are given enemies even more reprehensible by the saga to show them in a better light.

Ingólfr sviðinn and his son Þorbrandr appear in chapter 3 of *Fóstbræðra saga* (ÍF 6), when Þorgeirr and Þormóðr are apparently at their least popular. As soon as we have been told of the foster-brothers' practices (raiding by boat in their homeland), Ingólfr is brought in to provide a more

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<sup>360</sup> Andersson, *Analytic Reading*, p. 264.

<sup>361</sup> 'En Hallr [...] kvað þat mörgum manni kunnigt vera, at varla fekksk meiri ójafnaðarmaðr en Þorsteinn var', ÍF 10, 211; 213: 'But Hallr ... said that many men knew it to be the case that there was barely anyone more inequitable than Þorsteinn was'.

<sup>362</sup> ÍF 6, 125: 'many said that they would not prove to be equitable men.'

<sup>363</sup> Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues with the Viking Age*, p. 144.

severe threat to the local community and to encourage the foster-brothers to take on more socially helpful tasks. Ingólfr and his son are thieves whose status is protected by the chieftain Vermundr mjóvi, but under the sponsorship and gentle goading of the widow Sigrfljóð the violence of the foster-brothers is directed at these deserving individuals. She uses Þormóðr and Þorgeirr as champions (building on their established enmity with Vermundr)<sup>364</sup> in a way that prefigures their future service of St Óláfr in Norway. Under a guiding influence, the foster-brothers' warlike nature can be put to good use throughout the saga, yet when they are outside the patronage of Sigrfljóð and Óláfr, Þorgeirr and Þormóðr nevertheless revert to their destructive ways.

The episode with Ingólfr has elements in common with the *ójafnaðarmenn* of *Bárðar saga* and *Gunnars saga* in that the foster-brothers are not targeted by Ingólfr's *ójafnaðr*, rather they make a proactive move against him. This may be due to the fact that, under patronage, Þorgeirr and Þormóðr behave according to social rules different from the personal, honour-based feuds that dominate many of the *Íslendingasögur*. When conflict in the saga does become personal and vengeance dominates the narrative it is notable that the enemies of the foster-brothers are described as being *ójafnaðr*. As such they are depicted as being worse than the protagonists, whose inequity remains the report of the public alone rather than the explicit judgement of the saga narrator.

The first of these personal vengeance involves Jǫðurr Klængsson, who kills Þorgeirr's father and is introduced as 'ódæll ok lítill jafnaðarmaðr við marga men';<sup>365</sup> the second is the alliance of Þórarinn ofsi and Þorgrímr trolli Einarsson, one of whom bears his personality in his name whilst the latter is explained to be an *ójafnaðarmaðr* slightly later in the saga.<sup>366</sup> Jǫðurr is Þorgeirr's first test, appearing before Ingólfr sviðinn in the narrative, whilst Þórarinn and Þorgrímr are at once Þorgeirr's downfall and Þormóðr's motivation for vengeance throughout the latter part of the story. Thus *Fóstbræðra saga*, like *Eyrbyggja saga*, is dotted with *ójafnaðarmenn* who fulfil various narrative roles, who remind us that when their violence is put to appropriate social use (championing others' rights and obtaining just vengeance), the foster-brothers are the rightful heroes of the saga.

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<sup>364</sup> ÍF 6, 125–6.

<sup>365</sup> ÍF 6, 126: 'overbearing and not a very equitable man when dealing with others'.

<sup>366</sup> Þorgrímr trolli Einarsson and his relatives are described as such five chapters on from their first appearance (ÍF 6, 201; 224). I have omitted Þorgrímr from this part of the study, as he appears considerably earlier in the text than he is described as an *ójafnaðarmaðr*; although one may think of him as conforming to the group of *ójafnaðarmenn* who bring down a hero (Þorgeirr), or as one who drives the ensuing narrative of Þormóðr's revenge.

## *Ljósvetninga saga*

Another saga whose narrative has been termed episodic and compared with that of *Eyrbyggja saga* is *Ljósvetninga saga*.<sup>367</sup> As it has been likened to a collection of local lore, or *þættir* told separately and grouped together,<sup>368</sup> we might not expect the *ójafnaðarmenn* at the start of the saga to have much of an impact. The first three chapters (ÍF 10, after the A-tradition manuscripts)<sup>369</sup> deal with the case of the *Víðarssynir*, of whom *Sq̄lmundr* is the ring-leader and a known womaniser. The cunning and noble chieftain Ófeigr Járngerðarson is soon brought in to put a stop to his womanising, so the brothers turn to another typical form of behaviour: refusing merchants their money for goods previously accepted. They are outlawed after a brief skirmish resulting in a merchant's death at their home,<sup>370</sup> but *Sq̄lmundr* obtains the support of Hákon jarl, then ruler of Norway, to return to Iceland a year before the end of his outlawry. Hákon gives him goods to buy the allegiance of two powerful chieftains: Þorgeirr and Guðmundr ríki, who agree on a plan to invalidate *Sq̄lmundr*'s outlawry. They are foiled by the resistance of Þorgeirr's sons, who ally themselves with Arnórr, their neighbour and the father of the dead merchant's trading partner. Þorgeirr's son Hq̄skuldr manages to kill *Sq̄lmundr* whilst he is with the chieftains' escort and a battle breaks out between the father's party (including Guðmundr ríki) and the sons' (the most prominent men of *Ljósavatn*).

A settlement is reached, but in the words of Andersson 'the ground for the hostility [between Guðmundr ríki and the *Ljósvetningar*] is laid.'<sup>371</sup> In his opinion the dispute sets up the conflicts that define the entire saga's other narratives:

The reader might suppose that this moral statement [that *Sq̄lmundr* died beyond the protection of the law] is unimportant for the saga as a whole because the characters in question are minor and for the most part disappear rather quickly from the action. But they are not to be dismissed lightly. The characters with positive attributes have in common that they are destined to oppose Gudmund, whereas the negative qualities of the three troublemakers [the *Víðarssynir*] are

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<sup>367</sup> Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues with the Viking Age*, p. 74.

<sup>368</sup> Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, p. 242; Andersson, *Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, p. 121.

<sup>369</sup> Björn Sigfússon, 'Formáli', ÍF 10, §3.

<sup>370</sup> ÍF 11, 5; the C-tradition states that this fight occurs 'í virki einu' ('in a fortress'), cf. Óspakr in *Eyrbyggja saga* and Þórólfr heljarskinn in *Vatnsdæla saga* (ÍF 11, 5, n. 3).

<sup>371</sup> Andersson, *Analytic Reading*, p. 259.

significant not so much in and of themselves as for the light they shed on their eventual protector. The question soon put to the reader is why a chieftain of Gudmund's standing would take the part of such egregious villains.<sup>372</sup>

In addition, this episode succeeds in establishing the measured menace that Ófeigr Járnergðarson brings to a situation and in explaining Þorkell hákr Þorgeirsson's enmity towards Guðmundr ríki. It does not fit the pattern of the *ójafnaðarmaðr* discussed above in 3.ii.a because there is not really a direct link between it and the ensuing stories: although Þorkell hákr is one of the brothers set against Sǫlmundr and his powerful allies in this episode, his later actions are never expressed in terms of vengeance against Guðmundr for his behaviour at this point in the saga. There is a general sense of enmity between the Ljósvetningar and Mǫðrvellingar established by the beginning of the saga that is more akin to the stage-setting of *Reykðæla saga* than the joined-up feuds of *Hávarðar saga* and *Þórðar saga*.

### ***Fljótsdæla saga***

*Fljótsdæla saga* is a strange beast, preserved in its earliest form in a seventeenth-century paper manuscript as a continuation of *Hrafnkels saga*.<sup>373</sup> There is no title to indicate that it is the beginning of a different story,<sup>374</sup> but in content it is exaggerated and fantastic from the outset. Its lone *ójafnaðarmaðr* appears early in the narrative that begins following *Hrafnkels saga* and he is active in chapters 1 and 2 of what we call *Fljótsdæla saga* (ÍF 11). There is little to connect these chapters to the surrounding narratives other than the family of Hrafnkell and his lineage. Ásbjörn Hrafnkelsson is the father of Helgi, a major character in the conflict recounted by *Fljótsdæla saga*, so his short dispute with an *ójafnaðarmaðr* serves to bridge the generational gap between the two stories and to explain how Helgi Ásbjarnarson came to live at Oddsstaðr.<sup>375</sup> The episode is a simple one: Oddr's son Qlvíðr is a particularly foolish man who borrows horses from Ásbjörn, the son of Hrafnkell Freysgoði, without permission. He then refuses to pay compensation, saying ironically '[m]un ek ok gjöra alla jafna um þetta mál',<sup>376</sup> Ásbjörn has him outlawed, goes to Oddsstaðir, kills Qlvíðr and claims his farm.

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<sup>372</sup> Andersson and Miller, *Law and Literature*, p. 99.

<sup>373</sup> AM 551c 4to. *Handrit.is*, <http://handrit.is/en/manuscript/view/is/AM04-0551c>.

<sup>374</sup> Jón Johanneson, 'Formáli', ÍF 7, p. xcii.

<sup>375</sup> ÍF 11, 238.

<sup>376</sup> ÍF 11, 217: 'I will also behave with equality to everyone in this case'.

That the episode relates particularly to the manner in which Oddstaðir came to be in Helgi Ásbjarnarson's hands is supported by the rather different way in which *Brandkrossa þáttur* handles Oddr and his family. Traditions surrounding Hrafnkell's descendants and the Droplaugarsynir — including those about Gunnarr Þiðrandabani — are notoriously messy, with contradictory accounts in a number of sources. Gísli Sigurðsson has attempted to untangle their similarities and differences,<sup>377</sup> but in this case the similarity is the significant point and it relates to the acquisition of land.

The same individuals appear in *Brandkrossa þáttur* under slightly different circumstances: Oddr is the trouble-maker (*ódæll*),<sup>378</sup> and Helgi Ásbjarnarson is pitted against him. Oddr is seemingly baited into killing a man who makes fun of his son at a games-match and Helgi takes the opportunity to have Oddr outlawed so that he can claim his farm. On leaving, Oddr asks Freyr to ensure that Helgi has to leave the land as unwillingly as he does,<sup>379</sup> which as well as bringing *Víga-Glúms saga* to mind (see below, 3.ii.d) must refer to the tradition surrounding Helgi's first marriage: following his first wife's death he could no longer bear to be at Oddstaðir.<sup>380</sup>

The events in *Fljótsdæla saga* when compared to those in *Brandkrossa þáttur* have been carefully tailored to suit their inclusion in between *Hrafnkels saga* and the ensuing story. The *ójafnaðarmaður* and his actions channel both Einarr's misfortune and Hrafnkell's haughtiness, harking back to the initial conflict in *Hrafnkels saga*. Ólviðr echoes the unfortunate Einarr when he rides horses he should not, but he takes on the role of Hrafnkell when he rejects Ásbjörn's request for compensation and has to be hauled from his bed-closet to face execution in his home-field.<sup>381</sup> *Fljótsdæla saga* is explicit about the comparison: '[m]önnum hans þótti þat óráðligt at taka hross Ásbjarnar, sögðu þat eigi vel dugat hafa við föður hans.'<sup>382</sup>

This episode in the narrative is thus far more self-contained than those in *Fóstbræðra saga*, *Reykðæla saga* and *Ljósvetninga saga*. Where they appear to look forward to the potential of the story to come, hinting at relationships and social functions that will affect the protagonists, this example looks largely backwards into the narrative preceding it, forcing a link between two separate traditions apparently united only in late manuscripts. The *ójafnaðarmaður*'s actions are engineered

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<sup>377</sup> Gísli Sigurðsson, *Medieval Icelandic Saga*, chs. 4–6.

<sup>378</sup> ÍF 11, 185.

<sup>379</sup> ÍF 11, 186.

<sup>380</sup> See Gísli Sigurðsson, *Medieval Icelandic Saga*, pp. 211–4.

<sup>381</sup> ÍF 11, 217–8; cf. 103–4; 106; 119.

<sup>382</sup> ÍF 11, 217: 'his men thought it inadvisable to take Ásbjörn's horses, they said that it hadn't gone well in his father's case.'

specifically to remind us of what has gone before, whilst also triggering a conflict that will explain the next generation's home farm location. This is done efficiently whilst also providing the intervening generation with a vignette to shore up the connection between *Hrafnkels saga* and *Fljótsdæla saga*.

### ***Vatnsdæla saga***

On his own, Þórólfr heljarskinn is an unremarkable villain: a thief accused of human sacrifice who is driven from society to live in a fortification which is ultimately besieged by the heroes of *Vatnsdæla saga*. He has no relatives and is a first-generation settler whose introduction is given well before the action comes to him.<sup>383</sup> Like the example from *Fljótsdæla saga* or the duel with Þorsteinn varastafr in *Reykðæla saga*, the section of the saga between Þórólfr's introduction and his death can be viewed as a bridge between different generational sections of the story. He plays a minor role in the events of *Vatnsdæla saga*, but his advanced introduction serves as a frame to the period of narrative that is most concerned with the establishment of power and the theme of reciprocity. The language of repayment and balance is used heavily throughout this part of the saga, which covers the final years of Ingimundr gamli's life and the establishment of his sons as the regional authority figures.

The structure of *Vatnsdæla saga*, like *Eyrbyggja saga*, does not fit well with Andersson's conflict scheme.<sup>384</sup> The most unique aspect of it is the fact that it assigns roughly equal amounts of narrative space to each of the five generations whose stories it relates;<sup>385</sup> within each generation, the saga also presents unusually self-contained instances of drama and conflict. There is no extended feud in *Vatnsdæla saga*, and this means that it lacks the typical climatic moment that Andersson identified as a pattern in many sagas. The fact that *Vatnsdæla saga*'s villains are dispatched quickly and easily prevents others from getting drawn into the dispute and contributes to the unusually strong sense of 'flat' characterisation in the saga.<sup>386</sup> The good characters are very good and very powerful; the bad characters are irredeemably bad and usually quite ineffectual.<sup>387</sup> The way in which the saga portrays its cast of characters is linked essentially to its structure: the

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<sup>383</sup> I have addressed this section in more detail in an article published during an earlier stage of my research: Shortt Butler, 'Balancing the Books'.

<sup>384</sup> Andersson, *Analytic Reading*, p. 221.

<sup>385</sup> Danielsson, *Om den isländska släktsagans uppbyggnad*, p. 61.

<sup>386</sup> See Jónas Kristjánsson, *Eddas and Sagas*, p. 233; Danielsson, *Om den isländska släktsagans uppbyggnad*, p. 91; Büschens, 'Vatnsdæla saga and Onomastics', p. 163.

<sup>387</sup> McCreesh, 'The Structure of *Vatnsdæla saga*', pp. 81–2.

characterisation of the main family and their opponents in *Vatnsdæla saga* is such that feud never has a chance to take hold of events, resulting instead in a series of disconnected encounters with trouble-makers and obstacles.

The only confrontation that verges on becoming something larger is that between Hrolleifr and the Ingimundarsynir. This episode spans two generations in a way that others in the saga do not and results in the death of Ingimundr gamli, the patriarch and first settler of the saga's central family. Hrolleifr is not himself an *ójafnaðarmaðr* or *ódæll*, but he is one of a number of antagonists whose presence in the narrative falls between Þórólfr heljafskinn's introduction and death. Following the chapter numbers of the Íslensk fornrit edition (ÍF 8), this section of the saga includes the following material:

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|-----------|---|
| Ch. 14    | Ingimundr arrives in Iceland.   |
| Ch. 15    | Ingimundr settles in Vatnsdalur.  |
| Ch. 16    | Ingimundr travels to Norway and back for building materials. Others in the neighbourhood are introduced, including Þórólfr heljarskinn, an <i>ójafnaðarmaðr</i> .                                 |
| Ch. 17    | Ingimundr tricks a Norwegian merchant into giving him a valuable sword.   |
| Ch. 18    | Hrolleifr and his sorceress mother Ljót seek accommodation with their kinsman Sæmundr, an old acquaintance of Ingimundr.  |
| Ch. 19    | Hrolleifr causes trouble with his courtship of a woman and kills a local man's son.   |
| Ch. 20    | In order to avoid the death of his kinsman in a vengeful attack, Sæmundr sends Hrolleifr to live with Ingimundr.  |
| Ch. 21    | Hrolleifr and the Ingimundarsynir do not get on; Hrolleifr and his mother are moved to their own farm across the river.   |
| Ch. 22    | In a dispute over fishing rights, Hrolleifr kills Ingimundr.  |
| Chs. 23–7 | The Ingimundarsynir seek revenge for their father's death and eventually overcome Hrolleifr and his mother.   |
| Ch. 28    | A sorcerer, Þórólfr sleggja, is defeated by the brothers.   |
| Ch. 29    | A kinsman of the brothers and a sorcerer called Þorgrímr skinnhúfa become embroiled in a dispute with the brothers. Although the brothers defeat them in a battle, Hogni Ingimundarson is killed. |
| Ch. 30    | Þórólfr heljarskinn, mentioned earlier, starts to cause trouble; the brothers kill him.   |

Table 2: Summary of events bookended by Þórólfr heljarskinn's introduction and death.

These events are clearly associated with the taking of land and its cleansing.<sup>388</sup> Ingimundr is a staunch supporter of Haraldr hárfagri and does not want to leave Norway for Iceland; he is a man of youthful *ofsi* who is not condemned for it,<sup>389</sup> and he must instead find his narrative motivation in the pronouncements of sorcerers.<sup>390</sup> But once in Iceland, the narrative turns to the justification of his family's pre-eminence in the region: this section of the saga is focussed on the evolution of the Ingimundarssynir as they learn to manage the running of the district.

In the first instance, Ingimundr's interaction with the Norwegian merchant Hrafn builds on Ingimundr's fear that his lifestyle in Iceland will not be up to the standard that he has been accustomed to in Norway. As the new chieftain in Vatnsdalur, Ingimundr quickly gets used to being granted first pick of any merchant's goods; he is therefore displeased at Hrafn's refusal to sell him a fine sword.<sup>391</sup> Ingimundr sees the sword as the appropriate payment for his hospitality, but Hrafn implies that Iceland is a backwater and Ingimundr's power is insignificant. Ingimundr responds by showing Hrafn who wields power on his farm, using the temple associated with his *goðorð* to trick Hrafn into submitting the sword.<sup>392</sup>

If the fact that Ingimundr's settlement in Iceland does not happen through his own will makes him look temporarily like a man with no control over his life, we nevertheless soon see him re-establish his bearing in the new land. The representation of Ingimundr's confidence in his station is in contrast to the learning curve that his sons undergo in the subsequent events; he arrives into a network of familiar acquaintances and supporters, whilst the next generation must jostle to maintain or establish their positions in the newly founded society. This split between the generations becomes particularly significant during the dispute with Hrolleifr that follows Hrafn's appearance.

Hrolleifr is the nephew of Ingimundr's foster-brother Sæmundr. He is tolerated by people at first because of this kinship, but ultimately he kills a man and Sæmundr's neighbours convince him to send Hrolleifr and his sorceress mother, Ljót, away from the district.<sup>393</sup> Ingimundr agrees to take Hrolleifr and Ljót in, but his sons react badly and he is forced to supply Hrolleifr and Ljót with land across the river from Ingimundr's own farm. This results in a dispute over fishing rights, the

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<sup>388</sup> Shippey, 'Interrogation of *Vatnsdæla saga*'.

<sup>389</sup> ÍF 8, 19; cf. Helgi Þorláksson, 'Stéttir, auður, og völd', p. 68.

<sup>390</sup> ÍF 8, chs. 10–12.

<sup>391</sup> Ingimundr's expectations are not dissimilar to those of noted trouble-makers (3.ii.b, p. 94, n. 345), yet in *Vatnsdæla saga* his behaviour does not elicit any sort of disapproval.

<sup>392</sup> ÍF 8, 47–9.

<sup>393</sup> ÍF 8, 53–6.



culmination of which is Ingimundr's death at Hrolleifr's hands. Eventually the Ingimundarsynir obtain vengeance, with the tacit approval of Sæmundr's son.

As tensions escalate between the Ingimundarsynir and Hrolleifr, the Ingimundarsynir express their fears in terms of their father's newly established chieftaincy: '[h]ann mun vilja gerask Vatnsdœlagoði ok vilja búa við oss sem aðra fyrr', whilst their father tries to emphasise that Hrolleifr represents a different type of threat.<sup>394</sup> Ingimundr sums up the problem faced by heroes when they are given the opportunity to react to villains: 'þér eiguð ójöfnu til at verja'.<sup>395</sup>

Hrolleifr's spear may kill Ingimundr, but it also ensures his own death. In the saga's portrayal of events he has far less to lose than the Ingimundarsynir did by provoking him, however, because Hrolleifr's death alone cannot compensate for the loss of a man like Ingimundr. This loss haunts the sons through the rest of the events leading to Þórólfr's *heljarskinn*'s death, through episodes that see them consolidate their power and perform various acts equivalent to *landhreinsan*. In the case of the first trouble-maker to follow Hrolleifr they are reluctant to become involved; in the second the dispute is within the wider family; in the third, the brothers display the kind of proactive response that might remind us of heroes like Gunnarr Keldugnúpsfífl.

The public is responsible for reminding the Ingimundarsynir of their responsibilities during these episodes, first when they petition the brothers for help regarding Þórólfr sleggja and his supernaturally enhanced cats. Þorarinn Ingimundarson's initial reaction is negative: 'eigi er allhægt við heljarmanninn at eiga ok við kottu hans, ok þar til spari ek alla mina menn'.<sup>396</sup> Despite his fears for the life of his men, he is convinced of the need for his help; a Norwegian associated with the Ingimundarsynir is killed in the attack on Þórólfr, however. It is only the value of Þórólfr's silver (on top of his life) that convinces Þorarinn that the loss was worthwhile: '[s]tórilla hefir nú tekizk, er Austmaðrinn minn hefir týnzk, en þat mun bóta, at endask mun fé Þórólfrs at bæta hann'.<sup>397</sup>

In the next dispute one of the Ingimundarsynir themselves is killed, but the stakes are higher as the dispute is with their kinsman Már — supported by yet another sorcerer, Þorgrímr skinnhúfa. The theft that Þórólfr sleggja was accused of is succeeded by theft that directly loses the Ingimundarsynir money, and they have no choice but to show that they are able and willing to stand

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<sup>394</sup> ÍF 8, 59: 'he must want to become the chieftain of Ljósavatn and wants to compete with us like he has with others before'; cf. Taylor, 'Land and Landownership', p. 105.

<sup>395</sup> ÍF 8, 59: 'you have uneven amounts to expend.'

<sup>396</sup> ÍF 8, 73: 'it is not at all possible to take on the man from Hel and his cats, and I would spare all of my men that.'

<sup>397</sup> ÍF 8, 75: 'a great evil has occurred, that my Norwegian companion has fallen, and ultimately Þórólfr's money must suffice as compensation for him.'

up to it. As Jökull Ingimundarson puts it: “Sagði [...] þat mikil firn, ef menn skyldu ræna þá þar í dalnum,— “ok dregsk sú mannfýla mjök óþarfi til, hann Þorgrímur skinnhúfa, at reita oss, ok væri hæfiligt, at hann tæki gjöld fyrir””.<sup>398</sup>

Whilst this conflict results in Hogni Ingimundarson’s death it is clear that the stakes were worth it for the brothers: the death of one who was neither *goði* (Þorarin) nor muscle (Jökull) nor foster-father to a future chieftain (Þórir) is compensated for adequately by the self-judgement that is allocated to the survivors.<sup>399</sup> The Ingimundarsynir have by this point risen to a position of authority that is at least equivalent to their father’s. When they learn of rumours about Þórólfr heljarskinn from the public, Þorarin no longer hesitates to act.<sup>400</sup>

Þórólfr’s earlier introduction gives us a summary of the first part of his dealings with the Ingimundarsynir.<sup>401</sup> He only moves to the fortress once Þorarin and his brothers have been informed of the fact that Þórólfr ‘var illa kenndr af mǫnnum’.<sup>402</sup> This account is reason enough to banish him, and his change of circumstances leads Þórólfr to robbery (and rumours of human sacrifice). Robbery and human sacrifice are enough to justify an attack on his fortress, and the Ingimundarsynir soon defeat and kill Þórólfr. In this episode Þorarin uses the public consensus on Þórólfr to manoeuvre him into a position that further justifies his death. The saga does not need to confirm or deny any of Þórólfr’s behaviour because by now the audience should have no problem backing the Ingimundarsynir as the rightful leaders of the district.

As the saga’s *ójafnaðarmaður*, how does Þórólfr work as a narrative trigger? The placement of his introduction so far in advance of his appearance in the saga is not accidental: the threat of an *ójafnaðarmaður* frames the other events of this section of narrative. His introduction is not so much ‘prophetic’ as it simply relates most of the events that will happen in the lead-up to the siege on his fortress. The events in between his appearances are significant to the development of the Ingimundarsynir; their power; the social dynamics of the district; and the establishment of the setting for the rest of the saga. Although their encounter with Hrolleifr teaches the brothers that when reacting to disruptive figures they should make sure they do not stand to lose more than they

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<sup>398</sup> ÍF 8, 76–7: ‘he said it was abominable, if men should rob them there in the valley— “and this worthless rascal, Þorgrímur skinnhúfa, adds to his gratuitous provocation of us, and it would be appropriate for him to be rewarded for this.’

<sup>399</sup> ÍF 8, 81; Shortt Butler, ‘Balancing the Books’, pp. 32–3.

<sup>400</sup> ÍF 8, 82.

<sup>401</sup> 2.ii.b, pp. 53–4.

<sup>402</sup> ÍF 8, 82: ‘was badly thought of by people’.

will gain, the three ensuing encounters shows them move onto adversaries who bring more in the way of rewards than they take in lives.

It is evident that the narrative equilibrium must be established and re-established with each episode and change of setting or generation in *Vatnsdæla saga*. In Iceland under its first generation of native-born chieftains, the equilibrium must be established a victory at a time, from Hrolleifr to Þórólfr heljarskinn. If *ójafnaðr* is the antithesis of the ideals of Icelandic society as depicted by the sagas then it is fitting that this series of events is framed by the *ójafnaðarmaðr* Þórólfr.<sup>403</sup> The Ingimundarsynir contribute to a series of foundational myths for the district through a successful learning curve that ends with a complete lack of tolerance for the designated trouble-maker.

### *3.ii.d: Drawing the action to a climax*

We now come to examples of saga narratives in which the main plot is driven by something other than an *ójafnaðarmaðr*, but where it nevertheless requires a narrative trigger of some kind to bring a great hero into disrepute or death. The three heroes in question in this section are Víga-Glúmr Eyjólfsson, Hörðr Grímkelsson and Gunnarr af Hlíðarendi; in each case their downfalls are significantly accelerated by the actions of the *ójafnaðarmenn* in their narratives. Each situation is distinct and the heroes are by no means in the same position at the time of their downfall. Glúmr is led gradually into acts of increasing folly that lead to him losing his farm and standing, whilst Hörðr is a long-term outlaw whose death is sought by members of the community and Gunnarr's outlawry is a more recent occurrence in the narrative prior to his death.

### ***Víga-Glúms saga***

As has been noted, the dispute between Vigfúss and Bárðr, the saga's two *ójafnaðarmenn*, brings Einarr Eyjólfsson and the Mqðrvellingar into alliance with Glúmr's enemies, the Esphœlingar.<sup>404</sup> Whilst Bárðr Hallason behaves in the manner of an *ójafnaðarmaðr* towards Vigfúss Víga-Glúmsson, Vigfúss himself poses problems for his own father. Bárðr's disruptive actions erupt through the killing of a guilty man and the rash insult directed towards someone with whom he is already at odds, positioning him as Vigfúss' antagonist. On the other hand, Vigfúss' own vengeance against Bárðr and the preferential treatment he gives his thieving foster-father Hallvarðr over his

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<sup>403</sup> Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, pp. 301–2.

<sup>404</sup> 2.ii.d, p. 53.

actual parent imply that he is Glúmr's antagonist as much as anyone's. Consider Vigfúss' words to his father, followed a short time later by Bárðr's words to his own father: '[Vigfúss] kvazk vilja mundu, ef fóstri hans yrði sekr, at Glúmi þætti þat alkeypt'; '[e]kki lag væri at, ef þú værir eigi ragr; slíkt gerir ellin, at [þú] hræðisk um sonu þína.'<sup>405</sup> Vigfúss abuses the feeling of paternal responsibility that Bárðr recognises and mocks his father for, and Vigfúss' actions as much as Bárðr's result in Víga-Glúmr's ill-fated contest with his biggest rival, Einarr Eyjólfsen.

Bárðr's *ójafnaðr* thus targets Vigfúss, but Vigfúss' defence of Hallvarðr shows him causing trouble for his father. As a result of these events, Glúmr's enemies grow in number and status. John McKinnell suggests that Glúmr's own personality is a combination of politician and *ójafnaðarmaðr* and that these aspects are personified in his sons Már and Vigfúss: as Glúmr ages, allying himself with his more troublesome son, his status as a politician is subsumed by his propensity to violent acts.<sup>406</sup>

I am in accord with Andersson's original analysis of *Víga-Glúms saga*, where he accounts for this section in the following manner: '[h]e is now wedged into an impossible position between family loyalty and the law, and when he harbors Vigfúss near Freyr's templegrounds, it is as if he has offended not only the secular authority but also the numinous powers.'<sup>407</sup> Andersson also draws a link between Glúmr's downfall and the involvement of Einarr and the Mqðrvellingar in his *Analytic Reading*, and he points to other significant episodes in the narrative, viewing each one as an

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<sup>405</sup> ÍF 9, 60; 62: '[Vigfúss] said that if his foster-father was found guilty, then Glúmr would find the outcome to be dearly bought'; 'it wouldn't matter if you weren't a coward. That's what old age does — make you afraid for your son'. The latter translation is from McKinnell, *Víga-Glúms saga*, p. 96; 96 n. 3.

<sup>406</sup> John McKinnell, pers. comm. delivered as feedback on Shortt Butler, 'Making Space for Power'.

<sup>407</sup> Andersson, *Analytic Reading*, p. 245. Andersson has since changed his opinion of the portrayal of Glúmr, claiming that because of the saga's closing words in praise of him we should not read any 'moral reservations' into the character, and should instead see it as a tale of the political astuteness of Glúmr, 'the quintessentially successful chieftain' (*Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, pp. 64–5). His aim in this recent work is to examine the chronological development of character and characterisation in the *Íslendingasögur*, however, meaning that he gives much more prominence to the analysis of Glúmr's character given in the closing lines of the saga than he did in his structural study. In the latter, the final lines of the saga came under his definition of an 'aftermath' and he paid them very little heed as a fairly standard closing formula. Rather than give the openly subjective closing lines undue prominence, I prefer to follow his earlier methodology regarding the narrative's overarching portrayal of events — events that lead very inexorably to the downfall and defeat of this 'successful chieftain'. From a very different perspective, Ann Hoffman finds a way of reading the praise of Glúmr's personality that does not elide his errors of judgement and morals earlier in the saga: Hoffman, 'Violence, Heroism, and Redemption', pp. 159–60.

escalation of Glúmr's unscrupulousness. Two in particular are worth discussing because of the involvement of *ójafnaðr*: Glúmr's first case on his return from Norway and the marriage that he arranges for Arnórr.

The first dispute, involving the field Vitazgjafi, is between Glúmr and the ambitious Esphœlingar Sigmundr and Þorkell, whose tactics are reported as *ójafnaðr* by Glúmr's mother.<sup>408</sup> This sentiment is repeated following the death of Sigmundr at Glúmr's hand when Þorkell struggles to get support from his fellow Esphœlingar: 'hafi þér lengi sýnt þeim ójafnað'.<sup>409</sup> The significance of this event is underscored when Þorkell is forced from his land by Glúmr and prays to Freyr that one day Glúmr will likewise be unwillingly removed from his property. Immediately after this, Glúmr is persuaded to support his nephew Arnórr in a marriage suit; the proposal is controversial, however, as it follows shortly after the woman's family had rejected the suit of the Esphœlingr Þórarinn Þórisson. Glúmr expresses reservations about Arnórr's intentions in terms of the proposal's inequity: 'ek vil eigi ójafnaðr bjóða Gizuri'.<sup>410</sup> The marriage goes ahead and Glúmr diffuses the ensuing tensions by brokering a marriage to Gizurr's other daughter for the indignant Þórarinn; however the saga reports an ominous prophecy concerning the cousins born from these two marriages, alluding to the dispute that brings the saga to its climax and forces Glúmr from his home.<sup>411</sup>

These episodes in the saga do not, therefore, work as 'fairly separable' in the same way that, for instance, the Víga-Skúta episode in the saga does.<sup>412</sup> The threat of being seen as *ójafnaðr* hangs over three crucial moments in the narrative that point inevitably towards its conclusion: Freyr is invoked to bring vengeance on Glúmr in a prayer that is here akin to a curse; Glúmr helps to set the scene for the future dispute between Arngrímr and Steinólfr, despite his reservations about their fathers' marriages; finally he is forced, through loyalty to his son, to defend the indefensible (Hallvarðr's theft) and then the earlier invocation of Freyr is brought back to mind when he hides his outlawed son in the temple. Put another way, these episodes consistently point forward to the loss of Glúmr's land at Þverá: that it will be lost through the increasing involvement of the Mqðrvellingar, first as foster-relatives of Vigfúss' enemies, and then as allies of Glúmr's enemies, becomes ever clearer. The significance of this outcome should be seen in Einarr's most familiar byname: Þværingr.

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<sup>408</sup> ÍF 9, 20.

<sup>409</sup> ÍF 9, 29–30: 'you have long shown them inequitable behaviour'.

<sup>410</sup> ÍF 9, 37: 'I do not want to ask Gizurr for something unequal'.

<sup>411</sup> ÍF 9, 41.

<sup>412</sup> Andersson, *Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, p. 64.

## *Harðar saga Grímkelssonar*

*Harðar saga* is a different type of saga: it is less concerned with politics and power than with the tragic life of its heroic outlaw protagonist. The trouble-maker at the beginning of Hörðr's life is no *ójafnaðarmaður*, but the role might be said to be filled by a combination of his uncle, Torfi Valbrandsson and his mother, Signý Valbrandsdóttir.<sup>413</sup> Signý practically curses the child Hörðr, predicting that his final steps will cause as much woe as his first when he destroys her treasured necklace with a grasping hand.<sup>414</sup> The beginning of his saga is at pains to remind us that he will come to a tragic end, but it is nevertheless the nature of outlaw heroes to be resilient. Before the predictions come to fruition Hörðr must have an illustrious career abroad battling revenants and vikings, marrying into royalty and returning home to stand up to his uncle Torfi, claim his inheritance and become a wise and just chieftain. The fall is therefore all the more dramatic when it comes six years after Hörðr's return to Iceland. All of the predictions from the early part of the saga arrive at the first stage of their realisation when Hörðr and his unpleasant companion Helgi are outlawed for a pair of impulse killings and the burning of a farm.<sup>415</sup> After Hörðr's party grows throughout his raiding and participation in a violent games-meeting, the saga's *ójafnaðarmaður*, Kjartan Kötluson, is introduced. Kjartan's introduction, discussed above,<sup>416</sup> does not lead straight into action involving him: immediately after it the saga recounts Hörðr and his men's journey to the island Hólm, where they will be able to survive in relative security. Kjartan himself does not reappear in the saga for a full ten chapters (ÍF 13), although his mother and brother feature in them. These intervening chapters tell of the various raids conducted by the Hólmverjar upon the livestock on the mainland near their island; despite supernatural efforts and a single proactive attack by Illugi rauði, Hörðr and his men appear unstoppable.

The first hint that the story cannot go on like this for much longer is Geirr's observation on the actions of the Hólmverjar: 'menn munu eigi þola oss svá mikinn ójöfnuð sem vér bjóðum.'<sup>417</sup> After an attack on a raiding party of Hólmverjar has more success, the local farmers look for someone to go to the island itself and Kjartan Kötluson returns to the narrative. Kjartan uses cunning and dishonesty to lure Hörðr's men from Hólm with the promise of a peace settlement: once on the

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<sup>413</sup> Torfi is described on Hörðr's return to Iceland as *óðæll*: ÍF 13, 55.

<sup>414</sup> ÍF 13, 16–7.

<sup>415</sup> ÍF 13, 56.

<sup>416</sup> 2.ii.b, p. 52.

<sup>417</sup> ÍF 13, 76: 'people will not tolerate the inequity we are offering them.'

mainland they are set upon and executed by the locals. Hörðr distrusts Kjartan from the outset, but it is not enough to dissuade the bored, isolated Hólmverjar from exploring an offer of rehabilitation. Finally, Hörðr is left alone with his family and Helgi. Kjartan resorts to mockery to get the hero to board the boat to the mainland and Hörðr reacts immediately to an accusation of cowardliness.<sup>418</sup> His suspicions about Kjartan's offer are soon confirmed, however, and the *ójafnaðarmaðr*, his purpose completed, is bisected by the hero's sword. Hörðr is chased down by Kjartan's brother Refr and eventually killed from behind whilst defending himself against much greater odds. The saga reminds us of his excellence as well as the fact that 'ollu því ok hans fylgdarmenn, þó at hann stæð í slíkum illverkjum, ok þat annat, at eigi má sköpunum renna.'<sup>419</sup>

The first part of this claim may not ultimately hold up to scrutiny (the killing of Auðr and the burning of his farm were Hörðr's crimes alone), but the saga has emphasised the role of fate throughout its narrative. In *Harðar saga* the *ójafnaðarmaðr*, like the 'herfjöturr' ('war-fetters') that afflict Hörðr as he flees,<sup>420</sup> is an agent of fate and its relentless pursuit of the hero, forcing events to come to a close when it otherwise appears as though the hero might endure anything his enemies throw at him. Kjartan does what no one else is willing to do, for the promise of a cursed gold ring and the prestige the community will give him — public opinion is a great motivating factor for him.<sup>421</sup> In this regard the perversity of having a criminal and outlaw as the saga hero becomes clear: public opinion backs the actions of the *ójafnaðarmaðr* and because of this we know that the public are as against our hero as this villain is, yet we are supposed to back Hörðr over the public consensus. Hörðr is isolated and misunderstood in this situation, which contributes essential sympathy to his story.

### ***Njáls saga***

The structure of *Njáls saga* has been characterised as tripartite or bipartite over the years, but in either scenario *\*Gunnars saga* is how the first arc of the story has been defined.<sup>422</sup> Without resorting to any arguments that deny the essential unity of *Njáls saga*, we might still say that there is a distinct climax in the narrative that occurs around Gunnarr's last stand and death. It is brought

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<sup>418</sup> ÍF 13, 86.

<sup>419</sup> ÍF 13, 88: 'it was because of his followers that he was behind such evil deeds, and also because no one might go against what is fated.'

<sup>420</sup> ÍF 13, 87.

<sup>421</sup> ÍF 13, 82.

<sup>422</sup> Miller, 'Why is your Axe Bloody?', p. 15.

about because the terms of Njáll's famous warning are fulfilled: 'veg þú aldri meir í inn sama knérunn en um sinn ok rjúf aldri sætt þá, er góðir men gera meðal þín ok annarra, ok þó sízt á því máli.'<sup>423</sup> In this context it is surely relevant that the only men introduced into *Njáls saga* explicitly as *ójafnaðarmenn* are bound up in the events leading to Gunnarr's downfall.

The role of Egill Kolsson and his children is not as clear-cut as that of Kjartan Kötluson. Egill and his family of *ójafnaðarmenn* are introduced immediately after Starkaðr and his family of *ofsamenn* ('arrogant/hubristic men').<sup>424</sup> These families are brought into the saga following the settlement and apparent resolution of Gunnarr's dispute with Otkell Skarfsson (in which Gunnarr killed Otkell, prompting Njáll's warning against killing twice in the same bloodline). The positioning of the introductions of Egill and Starkaðr's families indicates that we are dealing with a specific kind of narrative disruption. This is especially so when they are compared with the introductions of other trouble-makers such as Hallgerðr Hqskuldsdóttir, who appear in the narrative dynamically and are described through the eyes of others before the narrator passes judgement.<sup>425</sup> The introductions of Egill and Starkaðr's families follow an uncannily similar pattern to one another: patriarch; patriarch's father; patriarch's grandfather; the land settled by the patriarch's grandfather; other family members who will be relevant to the saga; the sons; their qualities; their more genteel sister.<sup>426</sup> The last few elements come in a slightly different order in the two families, yet they are most certainly designed to echo one another.

The two families are related by marriage (Starkaðr's sister is Egill's wife), and it is clear that the cousins are thick as thieves when the narrative continues, showing them discussing who would be a worthy challenger to Starkaðr's sons and his stallion in a horse-fight. Inevitably, Gunnarr is invoked, and the men go to ask him whether he will participate. Gunnarr is all too self-aware in his doubts about the nature of the fight, but he agrees, stating '[m]un ek þar eptir gera, sem þér gerið fyrir.'<sup>427</sup> That the saga's golden boy might consider repaying *ofsi* and *ójafnaðr* with like is not entirely

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<sup>423</sup> ÍF 12, 139: 'never kill more than once within the same bloodline and do not break the peace that good men have cultivated between you and others since this case.' Miller, 'Why is your Axe Bloody?', pp. 134–5, n. 1.

<sup>424</sup> ÍF 12, 146–7.

<sup>425</sup> Hallgerðr and Víga-Hrappr are introduced in this way (ÍF 12, 6–7; 209), and similarly Þráinn Sigfússon is given very little description by the saga narrator (ÍF 12, 87), rather his actions are allowed to speak for themselves. Even Mqrðr Valgarðsson's character description (ÍF 12, 119) pales in comparison to the detail lavished upon the heroes Njáll, Skarpheðinn and Gunnarr, to name but a few (ÍF 12, 57; 70; 53). See also Lönnroth, 'Rhetorical Persuasion', pp. 166; 168.

<sup>426</sup> ÍF 12, 146–7.

<sup>427</sup> ÍF 12, 149: 'I will behave afterwards as you have first behaved.'



surprising. Although the narrative itself refrains from judgement, Hǫskuldr Dala-Kolsson's bitter response to his brother's humiliation at Gunnarr's hands earlier in the saga indicates that not everyone sees Gunnarr's pre-eminence in the same positive light: '[h]várt mun Gunnari aldri hefnask þessi ójafnaðr?'<sup>428</sup>

Gunnarr is reminded of the dangers of sinking to the level of his opponents when Skarpheðinn Njálsson suggests that he would be better matched against the Starkaðarsynir and Egilssynir: 'vér erum hvártveggju hávaðamenn.'<sup>429</sup> Nevertheless, Gunnarr insists on meeting the challenge himself and things turn predictably sour. Þorgeirr Starkaðarson vows that he will not make a settlement and his only wish is to see Gunnarr dead for the insult his family has suffered.

Intriguingly, at this point in the dispute the saga takes us to the Alþingi for an inheritance case between Úlfr Uggason and Ásgrímr Elliða-Grímsson. Ásgrímr has made an error in his case and therefore Úlfr could invalidate it, but Gunnarr wades in and challenges Úlfr to a duel. The baffled poet backs down, as Hrútr was forced to back down in the face of Gunnarr's challenge earlier in the saga (the episode that prompted Hǫskuldr's comment about Gunnarr's *ójafnaðr*). Miller has observed that Gunnarr's purpose is likely to neutralise Ásgrímr as an ally of Gizurr hvíti, the man who prosecuted Gunnarr for Otkell's death, however, '[t]he author also lets us see a Gunnar that more than a few people are experiencing as a rather high-handed bully'.<sup>430</sup>

Rather like Víga-Glúmr being drawn into the defence of his son the *ójafnaðarmaðr*, Gunnarr is now set on a dangerous path. The two families, *ofsamenn* and *ójafnaðarmenn* alike, gather forces for a very unevenly matched attack on Gunnarr and his sons, who between the three of them kill fourteen of their attackers, leaving only two *ofsamenn* alive: Starkaðr and his son Þorgeirr. Whilst Njáll's earlier warning not to kill twice within one bloodline referred explicitly to Otkell's family, it is nevertheless striking that in this attack Gunnarr and his sons wipe out Egill and his entire male line of descent, just as it is striking that a survivor, Þorgeirr, bears the same name as the man whose death later in the saga will bring Gunnarr's own fate nearer.<sup>431</sup>

Þorgeirr Starkaðarson, the most proactive survivor, understandably desires vengeance for the deaths of his brothers and his cousins, especially after Njáll and Gunnarr contrive to have all the dead men declared outlaws at the time of death. With the help of Mqrðr Valgarðsson, the saga's most notorious villain, Þorgeirr embarks on his own convoluted quest for vengeance, pursuing the outcome of Njáll's warning to Gunnarr: the death of Þorgeirr Otkelsson and Gunnarr's refusal to

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<sup>428</sup> ÍF 12, 67: 'will vengeance never be taken for Gunnar's inequitable behaviour?'

<sup>429</sup> ÍF 12, 150: 'we are matched in our aggressive ambition.'

<sup>430</sup> ÍF 12, 128–9; Miller, 'Why is your Axe Bloody?', pp. 151–2.

<sup>431</sup> ÍF 12, 139; Miller, 'Why is your Axe Bloody?', p. 135.

abide by the terms of his outlawry. Like Hörðr, Gunnarr's fate is sealed by a foreboding prediction,<sup>432</sup> but where *Harðar saga* uses an opportunistic trigger to bring its hero down, neglecting to refer specifically back to any one of its many predictive dreams or speeches, *Njáls saga* shows in excruciating detail how words have consequences. This happens through the manipulation of Njáll's words, where the initially private advice becomes a secret discovered by his enemies, which is then weaponised into a prophecy to be deliberately fulfilled by the plotting of Gunnarr's enemies. Thus Njáll's *ráð* ('advice') to Gunnarr becomes a *spá* ('prophecy') reported by Mqrðr to Þorgeirr Starkaðarson.<sup>433</sup>

In this respect the *ójafnaðarmenn* in *Njáls saga* have little to do as individuals, but they are inextricably bound up in the most fateful part of Gunnarr's life and their deaths motivate the malicious actions that bring about the hero's outlawry and death. As with Kjartan Kötluson it is not certain that this could be accomplished without their input (even if the family of *ójafnaðarmenn* plays second fiddle to the family of *ofsamenn*, the two are bound together). The situation is more complex in *Víga-Glúms saga*, where it is ostensibly an ally of Glúmr's who contributes towards his fall from grace. However, this makes Glúmr's actions more understandable on an emotional level: he is drawn into the sphere of an *ójafnaðarmaðr*'s disruption because the individual in question is his son. This is distinct from Gunnarr's unnecessary promise to sink to the level of the men who brought him a challenge; and from Hörðr's disproportionate reaction to one of the most half-hearted taunts one might find in a saga ('[e]igi muntu því hugminni en þínir men, at þú þorir eigi at fara á land').<sup>434</sup>

All three heroic downfalls are heralded by some sort of prophecy, prediction or curse. None refers specifically to the actions of an *ójafnaðarmaðr*, but Vigfúss Víga-Glúmsson contributes towards his father's loss of Þverá, Kjartan Kötluson is the agent of the doom predicted for Hörðr from his first steps in the saga and the family of *ójafnaðarmenn* in *Njáls saga* help to push Gunnarr towards the terms Njáll advised him to avoid. The resilience of the heroes involved clearly required the actions of unscrupulous men as well as the binding nature of a curse or prophecy, but we should remember that not all outlaw sagas need to rely specifically on an *ójafnaðarmaðr* to bring matters to a close, and that predictions of one sort or another are found in most *Íslendingasögur*. The narrative effect of combining a certain type of character with a curse or reference to fate is explored in detail in Part II. Even so, a particular feeling of injustice may be aroused in the audience by downfalls of the

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<sup>432</sup> '[W]arnings, however, assume Gunnar's will is completely free, and is not fettered in some fatalistic way by the advice Njal had earlier given him': Miller, *Why is you Axe Bloody?*, p. 137.

<sup>433</sup> ÍF 12, 139; 167.

<sup>434</sup> ÍF 13, 86: 'you are not as brave as your men, because you do not dare to travel to land.'

type discussed here: it is not fair that Glúmr should be dragged into disrepute by his son's actions, nor is it fair that Hörðr should be so cruelly tricked by such a shameful plan as Kjartan's, nor that Gunnarr should ultimately be laid low by the actions of a petty adversary such as Þorgeirr Starkaðarson. Fairness is a modern concern more than a saga age one in this sense, yet it is justified to view these heroic downfalls as a group for the way in which the blame can be laid at the feet of a convenient *ójafnaðarmaðr*, allowing us to gloss over the less worthy aspects of the heroes (Glúmr's dubious morals, Hörðr's fiery temper and Gunnarr's bullying pride).

### 3.iii: Structure and characterisation

From a detailed study of the conventions of this type of characterisation it is evident that the quality of *ójafnaðr* functions as a trope. There is enough common ground for us to speak of the 'typical *ójafnaðarmaðr*': most likely a thief or womaniser, someone unpopular who will come to a violent end, and someone who is generally found at the outset of the saga. Traditional referentiality allows for variation on this theme, however, so that the characters can perform whatever function is necessary in the saga they are found in. In Ranković's study of the *blár*-clothed killer in the *Íslendingasögur* she identified examples that were in keeping with our expectations for that particular trope, whilst suggesting that outliers might be either innovators that contributed to the formation of the trope or later variations demonstrating a knowledge of the expected conventions.<sup>435</sup> The conventions that have emerged from Part I relate to the social status of the *ójafnaðarmenn* in question, but also to wider issues of generic traditions and perhaps, therefore to a rough chronology of saga development.

Examples such as Þórólfr bægifótr and Víga-Styrr in *Eyrbyggja saga* deviate further from the common ground than many of the others. The difference is a question of narrative integration: whilst most of these characters can easily be called minor, or flat characters, Þórólfr, Styrr and to an extent Þorbjörn in *Hávarðar saga* and Vígfúss in *Víga-Glúms saga* are less easily labelled as such. Status is evidently a factor in this: these are the chieftains, chieftains' sons and chieftains' fathers of the corpus. It is notable that when a well-connected *ójafnaðarmaðr* is associated with the saga's antagonists (as in 3.ii.a) the narrative can become dissatisfactory as the audience grows frustrated with efforts to obtain vengeance for a reprehensible personality. Conversely, when the trouble-maker is allied to the protagonists the effect is either tragic (*Reykðæla saga*'s Vémundr kǫgurr and Vígfúss Víga-Glúmsson) or cynical (neither Snorri's vengeance on behalf of Styrr nor Arnkell's fight to

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<sup>435</sup> Ranković, 'Tinkering with Formulas'.

get Krákunes back are particularly edifying episodes). Genre evidently plays a role in this and in other patterns associated with the trope of the *ójafnaðarmaðr*: the heroic nature of *Þórðar saga* and *Hávarðar saga* is starkly distinct from the political manoeuvring of *Eyrbyggja saga* or the more personal conflicts of *Víga-Glúms saga* and *Reykðæla saga*. Such distinctions are not binaries, however, and Arnkell's association with Þórólfr bægifótr's legacy may also be seen as tragic, whilst Glúmr's behaviour in the latter part of his saga speaks more to the cynicism of Snorri goði's politics.

Another finding from the examples addressed here is the fact that in two of the instances given at 3.ii.b the *ójafnaðarmaðr* does not even need to act in order to become the hero's target. Both *Gunnars saga* and *Bárðar saga* are generic outliers and they are likely to be rather late additions to the corpus of the sagas.<sup>436</sup> This correlates with the evidence that the *ójafnaðarmaðr* had become an established part of saga narrative, and that later sagas could therefore assume a ready knowledge of the conventions and take shortcuts with their own *ójafnaðarmenn*. This development sees the actions of the narrative trigger having a reduced effect: the narrator's word on the Þorgrímsynir and on Þorkell is final, and we must take it on trust that their character introduction is all that is needed to justify their punishment at the hands of the hero. The mechanics of what we feel to be the poor characterisation of these late, legendary tales are spelled out in this distinction: these *ójafnaðarmenn* are characterised purely by their narrative function, and a wider sense of personality is not deemed necessary by the narrators of these sagas.

Similarly functional is the example of Qlvíðr Oddsson in *Fljótsdæla saga*. His actions are given a little more significance by the narrative — he is only killed once he has interfered with Ásbjörn's horses — but they are suspiciously derivative of material in *Hrafnkels saga*. It appears that the composer of *Fljótsdæla saga* in its present form saw the figure of the *ójafnaðarmaðr* as the ultimate tool for getting things done: Qlvíðr's presence allows other people to be moved about the landscape to suit the narrative. The sheer usefulness of the narrative trigger has seen the characters who perform this function 'flattened' beyond any of the other examples studied here.

On the other hand, many high-status characters defy the conventions of the *ójafnaðarmaðr* in a different sense, becoming too 'round' for the conventions, as opposed to too 'flat'.<sup>437</sup> As will be expanded on in Chapter 4, characters connected with well-known families and narratives such as Víga-Styrr and Vigfúss Víga-Glúmsson are bound by traditions other than those associated with the *ójafnaðarmaðr* or narrative trigger. Styrr's importance to Snorri goði's story ensures that his being *ójafnaðarfullr* is entirely incidental to the plot; the narrator may tell us that he is this kind of person,

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<sup>436</sup> Johannes Halldórsson, 'Formáli', ÍF 14, p. lxxiv; Þórhallur Vilmundarson, 'Formáli', ÍF 13, pp. xcvi–ix.

<sup>437</sup> See 1.ii.

but his interactions with others in the saga do not quite bring him into line with the functional category of the narrative trigger. In this case, the individual trumps structural functionality.

This would suggest that the ideal, conventional *ójafnaðarmaðr* as narrative trigger maintains a balance between functionality and individuality, motivating the action of the saga with behaviour that is nonetheless recognisably personal. Þórðr hrossamaðr in *Þorsteins þáttr stangarhöggs* is a good example of this. Having been told that he is an *ójafnaðarmaðr* we expect him to act in the way that he does, and indeed he provokes the action of the plot; yet the connections between him and Bjarni's other householders are developed just enough for us to grasp a more tangible picture of Þórðr. He is a man of relatively low status who thinks that the position of his employer transfers a degree of respect to him. This makes him think he can get away with actions against a man of lower standing such as Þorsteinn. Þórðr is thus a minor character that successfully walks the line between structural device and memorable personality.

Throughout Part I my emphasis has been on the structural element of character introductions, although the characters' individuality has emerged in line with the confirmation of their functional role. The placement of a character introduction and the language used in the introduction itself are crucial to audience expectations regarding these characters and the narrative as a whole. The conventions of language and structure mean that the introduction of an *ójafnaðarmaðr* at the opening of a saga tells us that a certain kind of disruption is on its way; the interactions between this character and others in the saga reveals exactly how the dynamics of society and story will be affected. There is always an obligation for other characters to respond to the actions of the *ójafnaðarmaðr*, and by forcing the hands of those around them the narrative catalyst brings about conflict and thus plot.

In Part II I expand upon the individual and the personal aspects of narrative triggers. Schach compared character introductions to prophecy, and in functional terms these are not terribly different devices.<sup>438</sup> How the person described by the narrator appears in their interactions with other characters — and how their actions interact with elements such as prophecy and fate — are explored across Part II. The motivation of the plot cannot always line up with the motivations of characters, and the motivation of characters does not always accord with audience expectations. Chapters 4–6 engage with problems such as this, building upon the themes that have emerged throughout Part I.

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<sup>438</sup> Schach, 'Character Creation', p. 248.

## PART II

### EXPANDING THE PARAMETERS OF THE NARRATIVE TRIGGER

#### (PERSONALISING AND INDIVIDUALISING)

#### 4: PROPHECY OR PERSONALITY; CURSE OR CHARACTER?

##### EVALUATING BEHAVIOUR IN *LAXDÆLA SAGA* AND *GRETTIS SAGA*

Part I of this thesis established the corpus of *ójafnaðarmenn* introduced as such by the narrative voice of the sagas and noted patterns in their narrative functions. It is now the objective of Part II to broaden this study in a number of directions. Whilst the focus on the representation of the quality of *ójafnaðr* will be retained, Chapters 4–6 will also take into account the narrative function of characters described through the other terms listed at 2.ii.d. By identifying the networks of characters described with the words *óvinsæll*, *ódæll*, *ofsi*, *hávaði* and similar, in conjunction with those who are described as being *ójafnaðr*, I build up a more comprehensive view of how the sagas establish narrative culpability, that is, the identification of the characters or circumstances that contribute to the progress of the plot. The tension between fate and personality as narrative motivators is a central part of this question, in which structural devices and individual characters seem most at odds.

All these Old Norse terms allude to a disjunction between how the individual in question sees themselves and how others can be said to perceive them and their actions; this describes, for instance, the quality of arrogance no matter which deictic level one refers to. As well as being integral to the distinction between someone who is an *ójafnaðarmaðr* and someone who is *engi jafnaðarmaðr*, the role of public opinion in characterisation more generally is explored in these chapters. Especial reference is given to the ways in which a saga narrator can vary their rhetorical techniques when it comes to characterisation in order to manipulate the audience. References to public opinion are a part of this. With the exception of Holmgöngu-Ljótr in *Hávarðar saga*, the public opinion of *ójafnaðr* can be seen to produce a subtler type of descriptive characterisation than the bald introductory statements studied in Part I.<sup>439</sup> Whilst the attitudes reflected in public opinion and in the opinions of other characters are all ultimately dictated by the same narrative voice as the character introductions, their rhetorical effect varies. Some of the consequences of this variation are explored in relation to *Laxdæla saga* and *Grettis saga* in this chapter, although a more in-depth

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<sup>439</sup> See above, p. 88 n. 332.

study is beyond the scope of this thesis. Linking into the rhetorical device of public opinion is the role of fate in the sagas, which I investigate as a proxy form of narrative trigger; a device whose function is to alter our view of the responsibility of individuals involved.

The present chapter intertwines examples from two sagas in order to explore these issues. At 4.i.a I focus on Þorleikr Hǫskuldsson in *Laxdæla saga*, an example of someone who is called *engi jafnaðarmaðr* and demonstrates the close link between this type of introduction and public opinion. The way in which audience expectations are manipulated by the narrator in descriptions of characters such as Þorleikr is echoed by the saga's pronounced use of predictive scenes or statements, including dreams, curses, prophecies or forebodings. Þorleikr's role in creating the necessary circumstances for Kjartan's death is indisputable, but many other figures comment on this inevitable outcome and contribute to it. The narrative effect of these manifold indications of what is to come is considered in 4.i.b, leading into a study of Grettir Ásmundarson, eponymous hero of *Grettis saga* who, like Hörðr, Glúmr and Gunnarr in 3.ii.d above, is bound to his death by a curse given partway through the saga.

Grettir's portrayal in childhood and youth prior to the curse sees him labelled with qualities including *ódæll*, *ójafnaðr* and *ofsi* by various parties including the saga narrator. The effect of these terms on shaping our reaction to the outlaw hero pre-curse and post-curse is discussed in 4.ii, taking into account the reliability of those who characterise others with these terms. Finally, 4.iii.a returns to *Laxdæla saga* and Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir. Like Grettir, she is accused of demonstrating *ofsi* at a pivotal moment in her life and in the saga, and the fear of being thought of as such makes her acquiesce to her father's poor decision. The role of narrative triggers and the impact of predictive tropes will be considered from the female perspective, contrasting Guðrún's control over events and public opinion with how Grettir, Þorleikr and other male characters are portrayed in the same scenario. In 4.iii.b the consequences of incorrectly evaluating someone are considered regarding both *Grettis saga* and *Laxdæla saga*.

#### 4.i: Framing the culprit

There are no characters in *Laxdæla saga* who are introduced according to the criteria set out in Part I for the straightforward *ójafnaðarmaðr*. Þorleikr Hǫskuldsson comes closest, however, as '*engi jafnaðarmaðr*' ('not an equitable man'). Generally when a character is called *engi/ekki jafnaðarmaðr*, this is associated with public opinion. Examples include: Vémundr kǫgurr in *Reykðæla saga* (ch. 4),

‘var engi jafnaðarmaðr kallaðr’;<sup>440</sup> the *fóstbræðir* in their own saga (ch. 2), ‘tölðu margir þá ekki vera jafnaðarmenn’;<sup>441</sup> and also in *Grettis saga* (ch. 25), ‘þóttu ekki miklir jafnaðarmenn’;<sup>442</sup> Tungu-Oddr Qnundarson in *Hænsa-Póris saga* (ch. 1), ‘engi var hann kallaðr jafnaðarmaðr’;<sup>443</sup> and Þorleikr Hqskuldsson in *Laxdæla saga* (ch. 9), ‘þótti mōnnum sá svipr á um hans skaplyndi, sem hann myndi verða engi jafnaðarmaðr’.<sup>444</sup> Notably these men are all of a much higher status than those discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, and only the *fóstbræðir* in their own saga do not survive the events of the narrative.

As a general rule, the most distinctive *ójafnaðarmenn* in Part I are found in the sagas commonly considered the ‘classical’ texts of the thirteenth-century.<sup>445</sup> For instance, *Eyrbyggja saga* with its unusual perspective on narrative disruption; *Víga-Glúms saga*, in which Vigfúss the *ójafnaðarmaðr* survives unscathed; *Reykðæla saga* and *Fóstbræðra saga*, both of which feature prominent examples of the *engi jafnaðarmaðr* type. That these texts are generally considered more sophisticated and subtle than those deemed their ‘post-classical’ counterparts may be a banal observation, but the different mechanics of characterisation in these sagas demonstrates different ways of constructing narrative and of justifying the story that is being told. For Gunnarr Keldugnúpsfífl, the only justification he needs is that his enemies are unscrupulous and that the audience know this in advance, whereas for *Laxdæla saga* and the targets of Þorleikr’s trouble-making, the narrator is at pains to excuse rather than to justify what happens.

#### 4.i.a: Þorleikr Hqskuldsson

Þorleikr is amongst the fifth generation of settlers in *Laxdæla saga*, so his introduction does not come right at the beginning of the narrative, but it is nevertheless given far in advance of his actions in the story. Like Styrr, who in *Eyrbyggja saga* is described multiple times before we encounter any scene that focuses on him, Þorleikr plays a passive role up until his first clash with his uncle, Hrútr Herjólfsson. Despite these descriptions, Þorleikr remains a somewhat minor character.

<sup>440</sup> ÍF 10, 160: ‘was not referred to as an equitable man’.

<sup>441</sup> ÍF 6, 125: ‘many people said that they were not equitable men’.

<sup>442</sup> ÍF 7, 88: ‘they were thought not to be particularly equitable men’.

<sup>443</sup> ÍF 3, 3–4: ‘he was not referred to as an equitable man’.

<sup>444</sup> ÍF 5, 18: ‘people thought that he was of the kind of disposition that he would not turn out to be an equitable man.’

<sup>445</sup> That is, a saga written in its current form between 1230 and 1280: Schier, *Sagaliteratur*, pp. 51–4.



He may be a prominent member of the central family, half-brother to Óláfr pái and father to Bolli, but he is out of the saga by Chapter 38 (of 78; ÍF 5). In these descriptions his negative qualities are alluded to twice, whereas the third description gives only general praise and presents a jarring contrast with the actions that follow.

### **Introduction (ch. 9)**

Þorleikr var mikill maðr ok sterkr ok inn sýniligsti, fálátr ok óþýðr; þótti mönnum sá svip á um hans skaplyndi, sem hann myndi verða engi jafnaðarmaðr. Hǫskuldr sagði þat jafnan, at hann myndi mjök líkjask í ætt þeira Strandamanna. Bárðr Hǫskuldsson var ok skǫruligr maðr sýnum ok vel viti borinn ok sterkr; þat bragð hafði hann á sér, sem hann myndi líkari verða fǫðurfrændum sínum.<sup>446</sup>

### **Second appearance (ch. 20)**

Þorleikr var engi dældarmaðr ok inn mesti garpr. Ekki lagðisk mjök á með þeim frændum, Hróti ok Þorleiki.<sup>447</sup>

### **Third description (ch. 25)**

Þorleikr Hǫskuldsson hafði verið farmaðr mikill ok var með tignum mönnum, þá er hann var í kaupferðum, áðr hann settisk í bú, ok þótti merkiligr maðr; verit hafði hann ok í víkingu ok gaf þar góða raun fyrir karlmennsku sakar. Bárðr Hǫskuldsson hafði ok verit farmaðr ok var vel metinn, hvar sem hann kom, því at hann var inn bezti drengr ok hófsmaðr um allt.<sup>448</sup>

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<sup>446</sup> ÍF 5, 18: 'Þorleikr was a big man and strong and most promising, reserved and sullen; people thought that he was of the kind of disposition that he would not turn out to be an equitable man. Hǫskuldr always said that of their kinsmen he most resembled the Strandamenn. Bárðr Hǫskuldsson was also an imposing man and endowed with wisdom and strength; he had that aura about him, that he would turn out to be more like his father's kinsmen.'

<sup>447</sup> ÍF 5, 49: 'Þorleikr was not a fair man and he was the boldest. Little passed quietly between the kinsmen Hrótr and Þorleikr.'

<sup>448</sup> ÍF 5, 70: 'Þorleikr Hǫskuldsson had been a great traveller and was with noble men when he was trading, before he established a farm, and he was thought to be a distinguished man; he had also gone viking and proved his manliness well. Bárðr Hǫskuldsson had also been a traveller and was highly esteemed wherever he went, because he was the best of men and a man of good judgement.'

The introduction places him amongst the other legitimate children of Hǫskuldr Dala-Kolsson, highlighting the disparity between their personalities.<sup>449</sup> The second passage describes Þorleikr's marriage and landholdings (and those of his brothers); the third shows him come of age, an independent man who is just about to come to a disagreement with his uncle. Where *Eyrbyggja saga* offered only a snapshot of Styrr at one point in his life, and a rapidly aging, dynamic portrait of Þórólfr, *Laxdæla saga* here guides us through the major milestones of Þorleikr's youth.

Thomas Bredsdorff has observed that 'this is a saga which is exceptionally given to evaluative language', whilst noting that even when characters are explicitly commended by the saga narrator the portrayal of their actions betrays a subtler sense of judgement.<sup>450</sup> The evaluations of Þorleikr are nonetheless laden with allusions to public opinion, as well as other techniques that distance the narrator from the opinions expressed in them. His introduction further dilutes the absence of *jafnaðr* by using the subjunctive *myndi*, positioning this as a public discussion of the child's disposition in which his father then offers his own take on matters. Hǫskuldr allows no specifics, but mentions his wife's kin and marks Þorleikr's less favourable qualities as abhorrent in his own lineage.<sup>451</sup>

Similarly, the saga does not quite call him *ódæll*, but *engi dældarmaðr* in his second description and by the third instance he has come to be thought of by the public as *merkiligr*. Yet the saga hints at what is to come, first in his second appearance when the dispute between Þorleikr and Hrútr emerges as a prospect, then contrasting Þorleikr's martial adventures abroad with his brother's in the third description (echoing their first appearance). The use of *engi* rather than the *ó*-prefix in two of the descriptions of Þorleikr as a trouble-maker imply the absence of the quality rather than its opposite. Regarding the lack of *jafnaðarmenn* in the sagas (because to be such was the expected social default), I suggest that the broad correlation between this type of description and characters from nobler backgrounds is a reminder that the default *jafnaðr* was more naturally to be expected from members of the élite. Thus the absence of the quality is remarkable, whereas in the lowlier characters featured in Part I there was less of an expectation that they ought to conform to the minimum social standards of reciprocity.

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<sup>449</sup> Schach, 'Character Creation', p. 248.

<sup>450</sup> Bredsdorff, *Chaos and Love*, p. 38. See also Lönnroth, 'Rhetorical Persuasion', p. 160.

<sup>451</sup> Cf. Schach, 'Character Creation', pp. 248–50. Unlike Schach I believe traditional referentiality is the simplest explanation for this reference; it is common for saga characters who take after their mother's side to have an unpleasant disposition.

Þorleikr is therefore a black sheep in a prestigious family. Despite their sometimes ignoble behaviour, one of *Laxdæla saga*'s most evident tenets is the pre-eminence of its main characters.<sup>452</sup> Þorleikr undermines the stability and unity of the central family, threatening our good opinion of the dynasty.<sup>453</sup> It is as much this as the legality or understandable nature of his actions that marks him as a man who is not *jafnaðr*.

Although his first violent action in the saga is relatively uncontroversial in its outcome, it confirms the bad blood we are told exists between him and his uncle. Þorleikr kills a freed-slave because the man, on Hrútr's advice, had set up his farm on Hǫskuldr and Þorleikr's land. The killing is lawful and Hrútr is presented as ignorant of the mistake, whilst Þorleikr is said to be acting with his father's blessing.<sup>454</sup> Þorleikr's decision to move his farm to the border between their lands nonetheless signals an intention to continue his active, robust defence of his rights and property. This is confirmed at Hǫskuldr's deathbed, when Þorleikr resents his father's wish to give a minimal inheritance to the illegitimate Óláfr.

Hǫskuldr (never tactful where family is concerned) deceives Þorleikr about the nature of Óláfr's inheritance and overlooks his eldest in favour of his youngest, bestowing foreign treasures on Óláfr. Whilst Óláfr himself may be considered less than gracious to his half-brothers in accepting these gifts,<sup>455</sup> he makes amends with Þorleikr by fostering his young son Bolli. Yet even though Þorleikr's injured pride is soothed by this gesture, his antipathy towards Hrútr endures.

A group of sorcerers enters the saga and their behaviour (robbery endorsed by a corrupt *goði*) is very much in line with that of the *ójafnaðarmenn* discussed in Part I. The difference lies in their use of magic. Magic causes the death of Guðrún's second husband Þórðr and his death moves the plot along both for Guðrún and for Óláfr's family. The sorcerers responsible for Þórðr's death are sent wandering past Þorleikr's farm, where he is tempted to purchase their particularly fine horses. The folly of Þorleikr's decision to engage with these ne'er-do-wells is obvious and the horses attract

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<sup>452</sup> A number of scholars place blame on characters described only in glowing terms by the narrator: Dronke, 'Narrative Insight'; Byock, *Feud*, pp. 146–7; Bredsdorff, *Chaos and Love*, pp. 35–50; cf. Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues with the Viking Age*, pp. 177–8.

<sup>453</sup> As Hǫskuldr does to a lesser extent in the preceding generation: Bredsdorff, *Chaos and Love*, pp. 37–9.

<sup>454</sup> ÍF 5, 70.

<sup>455</sup> Dronke, 'Narrative Insight', pp. 211–12.

the attentions of other unscrupulous characters;<sup>456</sup> Þorleikr, like the other ‘not *jafnaðarmenn*’ of *Fóstbræðra saga* and *Reykðæla saga* is now pitted against those even worse than him.

Þorleikr’s ineffectiveness in this part of the narrative is demonstrated by the fact that he is assigned little direct speech in his dealings with the sorcerers and is never given the ‘last word’ in these conversations.<sup>457</sup> His lack of control comes to a head when Hrútr intervenes to prevent the robbery of Þorleikr’s horses. Stung at the implication that he would not have been able to handle the thief himself, Þorleikr asks his tenants to ensure Hrútr receives *svívirðing* (‘shame/dishonour’) for his interference. The sorcerers exceed the request by some measure and cause the death of Hrútr’s youngest son; they are executed, whilst Þorleikr agrees to leave Iceland following a discussion with Óláfr.

Andersson associates the close of this narrative with the superfluous inclusion of ‘family lore’,<sup>458</sup> but both it and Þorleikr’s part are directly relevant to the tragedy that follows.<sup>459</sup> Þorleikr’s poor judgement leads to a situation in which Bolli is raised in the same household as Kjartan Ólafsson, where he grows up perhaps with some intimation of the lie told when he was taken in, namely that Þorleikr was a greater man than Óláfr: ‘er sá kallaðr minni maðr, er ǫðrum fóstrar barn.’<sup>460</sup> Despite this assertion Óláfr remains the better man, just as Kjartan always supersedes his foster-brother Bolli. When Bolli is fully grown his only allies are those who must be loyal first and foremost to Kjartan, because his own father is absent from the country and the saga.<sup>461</sup> Bolli is thus set up to be perpetual second to Kjartan and on top of all the supernatural cues for the tragedy that is to come, Bolli’s isolation within Óláfr’s household gives us a psychological explanation for the way things turn out.

Þorleikr has features in common with the *ójafnaðarmenn* of Part I and *Laxdæla saga* makes it clear that we should regard his reactions to Hrútr’s goodwill and Hǫskuldr’s desire to include Óláfr in his legacy with approbation. Yet Þorleikr’s relationship with other agents of discord (Kotkell and

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<sup>456</sup> Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, p. 104: ‘The horses are never quite dissociated from Kotkel; they were the first presentation in a bargained-for relation of continuing exchanges. A year later Eldgrim still identified them as “the horses that Kotkel gave you.”’

<sup>457</sup> Lönnroth, ‘Rhetorical Persuasion’, pp. 168–9.

<sup>458</sup> Andersson, *Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, p. 143.

<sup>459</sup> Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues with the Viking Age*, p. 175.

<sup>460</sup> ÍF 5, 75: ‘he is called the lesser man who fosters another’s child.’

<sup>461</sup> It is notable that Óláfr attends Bolli’s wedding to Guðrún despite his misgivings (ÍF 5, 130). Dronke has been the strongest critic of Óláfr’s role in the saga’s tragedy (‘Narrative Intuition’) although Bredsdorff also recognises the problems that Óláfr’s indecisiveness fuels (*Chaos and Love*, p. 42).

his family) is accommodating and puts us rather in mind of Vermundr mjóvi's chieftainly protection of the *ójafnaðarmenn* Íngólfr and sons in *Fóstbræðra saga*. Like Vémundr kǫgurr in *Reykðæla saga*, Þorleikr's death is not recounted: he is more than a narrative tool, but it is not a narrative focussed only on him and his enemies. It must be remembered that questioning the literary function of a character when they are high status and from a prominent family can prove problematic. High status people are remembered more frequently and in more detail by the genealogies underpinning saga tradition: Þorleikr is there because the rest of his family are, because it is a story about the important people from that region at that time. In other words, status can give characters agency in the sagas, agency that may override the apparent design of the narrative itself. For example, even had the saga narrator wanted to pursue the feud between Þorleikr and Hrótr further, it is likely that the traditions surrounding Þorleikr would preclude any narrative impulse to change his fate. Details, rhetoric and perspective could be altered, but not outcomes.

#### 4.i.b: Identifying narrative triggers in *Laxdæla saga*

It is evident that Þorleikr has a role to play in establishing the social setting required for conflict in *Laxdæla saga*. But can he alone be termed the narrative catalyst for the death of Kjartan and the ensuing feud? Perhaps not *alone*, yet despite *Laxdæla saga*'s complexity and its self-conscious use of dreams and prophecies, there are undeniably human causes for conflict lurking behind the irresistible sweep of fate. Other conspicuous trouble-makers (as well as the *óvinsæll* ['unpopular'] sorcerers already mentioned)<sup>462</sup> include Hrappr Sumarliðason ('hann var ódæll'),<sup>463</sup> Geirmundr gnýr ('ódældarmaðr var hann')<sup>464</sup> and Þórhalla in málga and her sons (*óvinsællir*).<sup>465</sup> The major result of Hrappr's inclusion in the saga is Óláfr pái's successful purchase and cleansing of the haunted land at Hjarðarholt,<sup>466</sup> but the others contribute more tangibly to Kjartan's fate. Geirmundr provides the sword Fótbiðr and its accompanying curse, and Þórhalla takes news of Kjartan's travel to the Ósvífrssynir at a crucial moment.

Þorleikr's involvement nevertheless has a more direct bearing on the *social* situation than any of the others', strengthening the evidence that the lack of *jafnaðr* is a specific social problem

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<sup>462</sup> ÍF 5, 102.

<sup>463</sup> ÍF 5, 19: 'he was overbearing'.

<sup>464</sup> ÍF 5, 77: 'he was an overbearing man'.

<sup>465</sup> ÍF 5, 86.

<sup>466</sup> Cf. Qlvíðr Oddsson, 3.ii.c, pp. 101–3.

and not just generalised trouble-making. The presence of characters who lack the quality of *jafnaðr* consistently signals a change in the social dynamics of the narrative they appear in. Geirmundr's role in the saga has no social ramifications that affect the plot; on a purely functional level he is the means by which the saga brings the cursed sword Fótbrítr to Bolli. Similarly Þórhalla and her sons function only to deliver the details of Kjartan's travel to his enemies. Þorleikr's function is to test the bonds of family loyalty to their utmost, forcing a new dynamic whereby social balance is inverted when Óláfr claims to be a lowlier man than Þorleikr, Bolli is moved to a new home, and Þorleikr leaves the country.

Why, then, if Þorleikr and these other characters all contribute in different ways towards the central conflict in the saga, does *Laxdæla saga* also press the role of fate so hard? Vésteinn Ólason issues a stark reminder:

The forces of good- and ill-fortune touch the lives of individuals in many sagas. We might say that it is meaningless to explain a character's fall in terms of ill-luck in a world in which fate is all-powerful. It is therefore natural enough to look for other explanations, relating to an individual's character [...] or in social factors [...]. Yet such explanations can be misleading unless they harmonise with attitudes which informed the saga world, notably the strong belief in fate.<sup>467</sup>

Fate is referenced repeatedly in *Laxdæla saga*, through dreams, prophecies, predictions, premonitions, curses and casual asides.<sup>468</sup> Everyone from the sorcerer Hallbjörn slíkisteinsauga to King Óláfr Tryggvason has an opinion as to how future events will turn out, and the predictions begin in chapter 29 with Óláfr pái's misgivings about Geirmundr, who shortly afterwards leaves a curse upon Fótbrítr: 'þetta sverð verði þeim manni at bana í yðvarri ætt, er mestr er skaði at, ok óskapligast komi við.'<sup>469</sup> This is followed by Óláfr's dream in which a woman claims of the slaughtered ox, Harri, '[s]on minn hefir þú drepa látit ok látit koma ógørviligan mér til handa, ok fyrir þá sǫk skaltu eiga at

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<sup>467</sup> Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues with the Viking Age*, p. 177. As well as issuing a caution about the approach of Meulengracht Sørensen, *Fortælling og ære*, pp. 250–65, Vésteinn's remarks seem designed to refute the assertion made by Dronke that '[f]ate plays no part in *Laxdæla saga*', 'Narrative Insight', p. 210.

<sup>468</sup> Cf. Andersson, *Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Saga*, p. 147 which compares the saga to *Völuspá*.

<sup>469</sup> ÍF 5, 78; 82: 'that sword will be the death of the man in your kin-group whose loss will be felt the most and will seem the least fitting.'

sjá þinn son alblóðgan af mínu tilstilli; skal ek ok þann til velja, er ek veit, at þér er ófalastr.<sup>470</sup> Next come Guðrún's four dreams and their interpretation, followed shortly afterwards by Gestr's premonition, in which 'ekki kemr mér at óvörum, þótt Bolli standi yfir höfuðsvörðum Kjartans, ok hann vinni sér þá ok höfuðbana'.<sup>471</sup> Hallbjörn slíkisteinsauga lays a parting curse on Þorleikr: 'Þorleikr eigi þar fá skemmtanardaga heðan í frá, ok öllum verði þungbýlt, þeim sem í hans rúm setjask'.<sup>472</sup> Although Hallbjörn begins by referring to Kambsnes as the source of his troubles, it cannot be entirely the case that 'í hans rúm' ('in his place/position') refers only to Þorleikr's farm there. Kambsnes is not mentioned again, and Þorleikr emigrates with his entire household (bar Bolli);<sup>473</sup> the space occupied by Þorleikr's successor must thus refer to social space occupied by Bolli, his only remaining relative in Iceland, who will indeed experience *þungbýlt* ('hardship/trouble'). Suggestions of the inevitable end to all this now come thick and fast: Óláfr's foreboding about Kjartan and Guðrún's meetings, Þorsteinn Egilsson's doubts about Kjartan's journey abroad and, with the weight of royalty and the patina of sanctity adding to his authority, there is Óláfr Tryggvason's lament that '[m]ikit er at Kjartani kveðit ok kyni hans, ok mun óhægt vera atgørða við forlögum þeira'.<sup>474</sup>

Whilst the rivalry that Þorleikr conducts with his kinsmen might seem of little consequence in the face of all of this foreshadowing, it still forces a social situation that fate alone cannot account for. Although we must acknowledge the significance of fate to the social attitudes that shaped the saga, Ursula Dronke was correct to observe that '[p]eople's "fates" are the consequence of their own decisions',<sup>475</sup> and Arie Bouman felt that the use of dreams was over-done and showed an author 'at a loss in face of the most critical situation, the deepest psychological crisis'.<sup>476</sup> Any intimation that the future is set in stone is thus seen as an attempt on the part of the story to shy away from cruel human truths; regardless of the unknowable depths of any medieval belief in

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<sup>470</sup> ÍF 5, 84–5: 'you have caused the death of my son and let him come to me in an unseemly state, and for that deed you will have the sight of your son drenched in blood through my management of events; and moreover I will choose the one who I know to be most precious to you.'

<sup>471</sup> ÍF 5, 92: 'it will not be a surprise to me if Bolli stands watch over Kjartan's head, and he then achieves his destruction'.

<sup>472</sup> ÍF 5, 107: 'Þorleikr shall not enjoy many happy days henceforth, and all of those who follow in his place will experience hardship.'

<sup>473</sup> ÍF 5, 111.

<sup>474</sup> ÍF 5, 112; 114; 132: 'the reputation of Kjartan and his family is great, and yet it will not be possible to prevent their destiny.'

<sup>475</sup> Dronke, 'Narrative Insight', p. 210.

<sup>476</sup> Bouman, *Patterns*, p. 132.

‘fate’,<sup>477</sup> so many references to an inevitable outcome affect the characters and the narrative profoundly.<sup>478</sup>

The curious toothlessness of Óláfr pái’s great status and power have caused consternation amongst some readers, who point out the flaws in the apparently peaceable decisions he makes and wonder why he does not intervene to prevent Bolli from marrying Guðrún.<sup>479</sup> His role in the saga at pivotal moments (the fosterage of Bolli, the marriage and divorce of Þuríðr and Geirmundr, the marriage of Bolli and Guðrún) can, however, also be compared to the foreknowledge displayed by Charlemagne regarding Roland’s death in *La Chanson de Roland*.<sup>480</sup> Óláfr’s sense of foreboding, combined with an inability or unwillingness to act upon it, feeds the suspense already felt by an audience familiar with the story from oral tradition; but the character nevertheless cannot alter the events of the story. If the especial tragedy and renown of Kjartan’s death explains why so many predictions and fateful utterances are present in the saga, it still does not quite account for the overall narrative effect. Óláfr’s portrayal is explicable, but he still appears powerless in the face of others when the role of the narrative trigger is repeatedly assigned to ‘fate’. This aspect of the saga might almost be read as the fantasy of a wealthy, powerful male élite who find that the fulfilment of a social responsibility for curtailing violence lies beyond them.

Þorleikr lacks control over the sorcerers he associates himself with; Óláfr tries and fails to manage the tense situation in his family and it results in a rivalry that he cannot hope to affect when his son and foster-son quarrel. He also cannot manage the dominant opinion that Kjartan is a better man than Bolli. But the saga is forgiving of Óláfr, who is consistently portrayed in a positive light, whilst it is less forgiving of Þorleikr, a designated trouble-maker. After all, Bolli has been given to Óláfr to foster several chapters before fate first intervenes through Geirmundr’s curse, and it is Þorleikr’s unreasonable attitude that prompts Óláfr to foster his son. The social setting must therefore be right before fateful predictions can begin to take effect on the narrative, and as ever it is the man who lacks basic *jafnaðr* who forces circumstances into place that allow the plot to unfold.

The inevitability of Kjartan’s death, combined with Óláfr’s conciliatory nature makes it tempting to draw parallels with the figure of the noble father found in *Heiðarvígá saga* and *Njáls*

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<sup>477</sup> See Ármann Jakobsson, ‘*Laxdæla* Dreaming’, p. 180.

<sup>478</sup> See Miller, ‘Dreams, prophecy and sorcery’, for a consideration of the impact of irrational cues in society and legal processes; O’Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, pp. 28–9.

<sup>479</sup> Dronke, ‘Narrative Insight’, pp. 211–14; Bredsdorff, *Chaos and Love*, pp. 40, 42

<sup>480</sup> Pers. comm. with Simon Patterson; Patterson, ‘Misunderstanding Dialogue’; Fentress and Wickham, *Social Memory*, pp. 55–8, esp. 58. See also Taylor, ‘Author Involvement’, pp. 15–16.



*saga*.<sup>481</sup> Where those fathers seek peace following the loss of their sons, Óláfr is pre-emptively desirous of peace from the foreboding he already has on Kjartan's behalf. Óláfr's lack of control is comfortingly assigned to the unrelenting pressure of fate, whilst Þorleikr's introduction, mediated by public opinion and the use of the subjunctive, implies his inherent lack of control over himself; others have already decided upon his character.

#### 4.ii: *Grettir Ásmundarson, a cursed character*

At 3.ii.d, the combination of fate and an *ójafnaðarmaðr* was explored in the case of three heroic downfalls. *Laxdæla saga* uses this technique to a degree, assigning Þorleikr an uncompromising role in the action that leads to the situation in the next generation, whilst intertwining foreshadowing of various kinds into the rest of the narrative. *Grettis saga* relies upon a similar combination where, as in *Laxdæla saga*, the disruptive qualities and curse mostly precede the hero's downfall. Grettir himself is the focus of these disruptive qualities, however, and the audience must sort through descriptions and accusations that include *ódæll*, *ofsi* and *ójafnaðr* before Grettir is cursed and the narrative lifts some responsibility from his shoulders.

Grettir is self-evidently a different type of saga hero to those that feature in *Laxdæla saga*, or even to the characters in *Eyrbyggja saga*. *Grettis saga* is generically complex, with roots perhaps beyond the usual content of the *Íslendingasögur*.<sup>482</sup> Grettir is a hero by profession as well as being the designated protagonist, single-handedly tackling everything from bullies and *berserkir* to trolls and revenants. Naturally, from a figure such as this one expects a different personality to the political schemers and grandiose chieftains, and Grettir is not disobliging in this regard.

In his introduction he is described as *ódæll*.<sup>483</sup> Additionally, his narrative arc differs from those of the other heroes discussed in 3.ii.d: the curses or fateful predictions regarding Glúmr and Hörðr both come early in their lives and take effect only after they have first had a period of success. Gunnarr is also a successful, powerful man in *Njáls saga* prior to his downfall. Although Grettir's fight with Glámr is an undoubted turning point in the saga and in his life — it earns him the curse that will dog him throughout the rest of the narrative — he cannot be said to enjoy the same kind of success in Icelandic society as Gunnarr, Glúmr or Hörðr prior to this.

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<sup>481</sup> Bjarni Einarsson, 'Der edelmütige Vater'.

<sup>482</sup> Guðni Jónsson, 'Formáli', pp. xlviii–ix.

<sup>483</sup> ÍF 7, 36.

Grettir's first appearance ascribes a disruptive quality to him and as such it is that which dictates our underlying opinion of his actions in the first part of the saga rather than a curse given during his early years. 'Hann var mjök ódæll í uppvexti sínum, fátalaðr ok óþýðr, belinn bæði í orðum ok tiltekðum'.<sup>484</sup> In his reader-response criticism of the saga, Robert Cook muses that we are not told where this 'difficult nature' comes from.<sup>485</sup> Although that might be said of every character introduction, by implying that this trait is limited to Grettir's youth the saga does not treat it as an innate quality, and as we soon discover, a large part of the problem is Grettir's father, who repeats the preceding generation's mistakes in rearing his own son.<sup>486</sup>

First impressions matter despite this, and despite the fact that we are told that this quality is limited to Grettir's childhood. In early scenes of his violence against animals and participation in games, his association with the quality of *ódæll* strongly colours how we view his actions. Whilst Grettir's behaviour may become 'understandable and forgivable' in due course, Cook never addresses why it is that the saga describes him in such a negative manner.<sup>487</sup> The behaviour of *ódældarmenn*, like *ójafnaðarmenn*, is surely not meant to be forgivable (cf. Chapter 5).

The contrasts in Grettir's personality and his narrative role are enhanced following his first return from Norway. At this point he rides high on the approval that he found with Þorfinnr í Háramarsey, where his uncompromising approach to thieves, bullies, bears and mound-dwellers won him powerful friends; enough friends to override the fury of the jarl.<sup>488</sup> As a child in Iceland Grettir struggled to find his place; in Norway he is able to revel in the precarious existence of an élite champion.<sup>489</sup> But like a similar character, Egill Skallagrímsson, Grettir finds this position is more popular amongst Norwegian chieftains than it is with royalty. For the most part, when Egill returns to Iceland, he keeps himself to himself.<sup>490</sup> Grettir, on the other hand, does not leave Norway entirely of his own volition: it is the stipulation of the jarl. He arrives home and the saga warns not of his

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<sup>484</sup> ÍF 7, 36: 'he was very overbearing in his youth, reserved and sullen, deceptive in both speech and actions'.

<sup>485</sup> Cook, 'The Reader', p. 136.

<sup>486</sup> See Cook, 'The Reader', p. 137; Poole, 'Myth, Psychology, and Society', p. 11; Torfi Tulinius, 'Framliðnir feður', pp. 305–6.

<sup>487</sup> Cook, 'The Reader', p. 143.

<sup>488</sup> ÍF 7, 84–5.

<sup>489</sup> Cf. Poole, 'Myth, Psychology, and Society', p. 11; Hume, 'Thematic Design', p. 471.

<sup>490</sup> Egill is only ever accused of behaving with *ójafnaðr* whilst he is outside Iceland: by Berg-Qnundr, who is himself *ódæll*, and by Berg-Qnundr's brother Atli: ÍF 2, 155; 207. As Egill's enemies their testimony is questionable, and it is also a matter of uncertainty whether the accusation of behaving with *ójafnaðr* should have exactly the same connotations when used outside Iceland, within a different social structure.

being *óðæll* this time, but of *ofsi*: '[p]á gerðisk ofsi Grettis svá mikill, at honum þótti sér ekki ófært.'<sup>491</sup>

Clearly not ready to abandon the life he has received a taste of in Norway, he looks to reignite an old grudge with Auðunn, with whom he quarrelled as a boy. Auðunn is now a farmer, described in positive terms as 'goðr bóndi ok gegn maðr; allra manna var hann sterkastr norðr þar; hann þótti inn gæfasti í byggðarlagi.'<sup>492</sup> Grettir appears at Auðunn's farm unannounced, dressed in the finery he got from foreign lords, with 'vapn ǫll in beztu'.<sup>493</sup> The scene is comic and a little sad: Grettir is childishy eager to prove himself against a man who has long forgotten any rivalry.<sup>494</sup> He is dressed to intimidate and to impress, but the farmer is out working and when he returns it is not long before Grettir's new clothes are covered in *skyr* — an appropriate excuse to wrestle Auðunn as he had intended.

Cook sympathises strongly with Grettir in this instance, but in the saga Barði Guðmundarson, who happens to pass by during the wrestling, does not.<sup>495</sup> He is dressed as smartly as Grettir is, in a cape and helmet, and authoritatively dismisses the idea that the wrestling match is just a bit of fun, adding other traits to Grettir's list of negative qualities: 'er ok ekki jafnkomit á með ykk, þú ert ójafnaðarmaðr ok ofrkappsfullr, en hann er gæfr ok góðfengr'.<sup>496</sup> Over the course of their interactions in the saga, Barði accuses Grettir of being *ójafnaðr* three times, with the final instance unnerving Grettir because in his view it takes the form of a prophecy (*spá*): '[k]alla þú þat sem þú vill, [...] en í ǫðrum stað vilda ek, at þú kæmir fram ójafnaði þínum en við mik; er þat eigi ólíkligt, því at nú gengr ór hófi offors þitt.'<sup>497</sup> Cook claims that '[t]here is a gap between these pronouncements and Grettir's actual behaviour, which is not at all that of a typical *ójafnaðarmaðr* [...] and the reader must try to adjust the different impressions.'<sup>498</sup> Cook's argument is that were Grettir typical of the type, we would expect him to have killed Auðunn rather than waiting around idly for a wrestling match, so

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<sup>491</sup> ÍF 7, 95: 'then Grettir's arrogance grew so great that he thought himself incapable of nothing.'

<sup>492</sup> ÍF 7, 95: 'a good farmer and an easy-going man; of all men he was the strongest there in the north; he was thought to be the most fortunate man in the district.'

<sup>493</sup> ÍF 7, 95: 'all the finest weaponry'.

<sup>494</sup> See also: Poole, 'Myth, Psychology, and Society', pp. 7–8.

<sup>495</sup> Cook, 'The Reader', pp. 139; 144–5.

<sup>496</sup> ÍF 7, 97: 'also it is not an equal fight between you two, you are an inequitable man and full of aggression, but he is meek and good-natured.'

<sup>497</sup> ÍF 7, 106: 'call it what you like ... but I'd prefer it if you brought forth your inequitable behaviour in another situation, rather than against me; and that's not unlikely because your presumption is now beyond moderation.'

<sup>498</sup> Cook, 'The Reader', p. 144.

Barði's judgement must be wrong. Relative to the scene with Auðunn this interpretation holds water, but Grettir's second encounter with Barði is on rather different terms. Only a few chapters on from their first meeting, Barði's judgement can be given more weight.

Barði is best known in saga tradition for leading a side in the eponymous battle of *Heiðarvíga saga*, but *Grettis saga* implies that Barði's leadership was not always seen to be so impressive. Grettir himself (having moved on from Auðunn to a new challenger) first needles Barði for the fact that he has not yet taken vengeance for his brother's death, then later reveals that he knows of Barði's plans to ride south and attack the Borgfirðingar. He offers Barði his services and we should be in no doubt that his eagerness is entirely selfish: a chance to do great deeds in battle cannot be overlooked, even if it is the case that 'líkaði Gretti heldr illa við Barða ok bræðr hans'.<sup>499</sup> Barði accepts the offer rather too readily before remembering to stipulate that he must check with his foster-father, Þórarinn; in response, Grettir sneers at Barði's lack of independence and warns that he will be annoyed if Barði leaves him out of his plans.

Before their next meeting, Grettir pursues other childhood enemies in non-fatal encounters. Barði, meanwhile, asks Þórarinn for advice and is told of Grettir that 'mikill ofsi er honum nú í skapi'.<sup>500</sup> Þórarinn is nicknamed 'inn spaki' ('the wise') and his words to Barði are prefaced by the loaded phrase '[s]pá er spaks geta', so we can take his opinion as fairly authoritative.<sup>501</sup> Barði agrees to leave Grettir behind and proceeds with his plans; this, too, reflects the narrative in *Heiðarvíga saga*, where Þórarinn tells Barði there is no room for 'einhleypinga óreynda' in his troop.<sup>502</sup> Yet there is no mention of Grettir in *Heiðarvíga saga*; there can surely have been no narrative expectation that the events established there would be altered to allow him to attend and do great deeds in *Grettis saga*'s version of the battle. Therefore *Grettis saga* must have specific reasons for showing us this scene between Barði and Þórarinn as well as his ensuing meeting with Grettir.

Their second encounter happens on Barði's return from battle. His men — tired and wounded — are his first concern when Grettir approaches them; without shame Barði sends for reinforcements from a nearby farm. It seems that Grettir wishes to challenge Barði as he challenged Auðunn; that by completing the business of revenge for his brother's death, Barði has unwittingly issued a notice to Grettir that he is the preeminent man. Hume is correct in observing that in this

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<sup>499</sup> ÍF 7, 98: 'even so, Grettir did not like Barði and his brothers'.

<sup>500</sup> ÍF 7, 104: 'a great deal of arrogance now dominates his mind'.

<sup>501</sup> ÍF 7, 104: 'that which is prophesied is a prophecy'.

<sup>502</sup> ÍF 3, 266: 'untested loners/unattached men'.

scenario Grettir ‘contemptuously meddles in the affairs of Barði’,<sup>503</sup> but his naïve search for courtly trials of strength is now not even the nuisance that it was to Auðunn, but beneath the worth of Barði, who has to face political and social ramifications for the actions he has been involved in. In this sense, it is like a meeting between the feuding heroes of *Reykðæla saga* or *Eyrbyggja saga* and the proactive, legendary-influenced Gunnarr Keldugnúpsfífl and Bárðr Snæfellsáss. Barði, tempered by the battle and more confident in his own judgement than he was previously (a change also reflected in *Heiðarvíga saga*’s version of the fight), tells Grettir ‘[l]egit hafa mér andvirki nær garði en at berjask við þik fyrir sakleysi, ok þykkjumk ek nú hafa rekit þat af mér.’<sup>504</sup>

Grettir is not like other *ójafnaðarmenn*: he does not hurt people out of spite and spread rumours about them like Þórðr hrossamaðr; he does not steal or womanise; he is not even a duellist like Þórólfr bægifótr or Hrafnkell Freysgoði; rather he just wants to fight for the reassurance that he is stronger. The closest parallel is Þorgeirr Hávarsson, who turns to his foster-brother and suggests they fight each other ‘er þeir váru í ofsa sínum sem mestum’.<sup>505</sup> Þorgeirr’s challenge results in the foster-brothers’ parting of ways in *Fóstbræðra saga*, and is a pivotal moment for two men at the peak of their arrogance. Grettir’s *ofsi* is not to be doubted either, as it has been described both by the wise Þórarinn and by the saga itself at this point in his life. But Barði’s reference to *ójafnaðr* cannot be dismissed: he is not the same man who interrupted Grettir and Auðunn’s fight and he now speaks with the same authority (through a *spá*) as his foster-father. The *ójafnaðr* that Barði refers to is nevertheless something that he then refuses to be targeted by: ‘í qðrum stað vilda ek, at þú kæmir fram ójafnaði þínum en við mik’.<sup>506</sup> This problematizes the interpretation of Grettir’s character: Barði is, at this point in the saga, the only person who feels Grettir’s behaviour is that of an *ójafnaðarmaðr*, but he now refuses to acknowledge the challenge presented by such. This may be a response to the ‘impersonal’ nature of Grettir’s challenge to Barði; he cycles through opponents without any notion of permanently putting an end to them, but wants only to ‘put to the test the extraordinary force which he knows he has’.<sup>507</sup> Such behaviour is socially abnormal, however. He does not want the reciprocity of feud, but a tournament with a clear winner. It is an unusual way of

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<sup>503</sup> Hume, ‘Thematic Design’, p. 472. Barði might also be thought to be ‘meddling’ in Grettir’s affairs by interrupting his wrestling match with Auðunn of course.

<sup>504</sup> ÍF 7, 106: ‘I’ve got more important business to attend to than to dispute with you for the sake of it, and it seems to me that I have now gone beyond such things.’

<sup>505</sup> ÍF 6, 150: ‘when their arrogance was at its height’.

<sup>506</sup> ÍF 7, 106: ‘I’d prefer it if you brought forth your inequitable behaviour in another situation, rather than against me’.

<sup>507</sup> Cook, ‘The Reader’, pp. 145–6.

going against social expectations, but it can be seen to fit with the definition of *ójafnaðr* as a refusal to reciprocate in a socially acceptable manner.

Cook's insistence that Grettir cannot be an *ójafnaðarmaðr* and that Barði must therefore be mistaken is based upon the erroneous definitions of *ójafnaðarmenn* that this thesis seeks to correct: there is more subtlety to this quality than being a cold-blooded murderer. Grettir cannot be a *jafnaðarmaðr* at this period in the saga because he does not behave according to the socially expected standards of reciprocity. As much as it was a problem for an *ójafnaðarmaðr* to refuse to pay compensation, it is equally unthinkable that he should refuse to take compensation justly offered, favouring instead the perpetuation of conflict on his terms alone.<sup>508</sup> Essentially, he expects to be able to increase his honour at the expense of others', without giving them the opportunity for retaliation.<sup>509</sup> The seriousness of this is described by Miller in terms that make it abundantly clear how it connects to the 'uneven' *ójafnaðarmaðr*: 'it was by getting even that one established the inviolability of one's honor, that is, by getting even, paradoxically, one person reasserted superiority relative to the other.'<sup>510</sup>

In this period of his life, Grettir is spoiling for a fight; looking for his match. Before his fateful meeting with Glámr, he is given advice by a man who knows his situation all too well, being introduced as 'mikill maðr ok sterkr ok inn mesti ofsamaðr; hann var siglingamaðr ok mjök ódæll, en þó mikilhæfr maðr.'<sup>511</sup> His uncle, Jökull Bárðarson — with whom his mother compares him favourably<sup>512</sup> — guesses instantly that Grettir is in the area because he has heard of the revenant and intends to fight it. This is Jökull's only scene in the saga, so like Styrr in *Eyrbyggja saga*, we are given little internal reason in this narrative as to why he is an *ofsamaðr* and *ódæll* beyond his own insistence that 'er ok nú betra at fásk við mennska men en við óvættir slíkar.'<sup>513</sup> The saga deliberately portrays Grettir's family as one in which disruptive personalities are common, as evidenced not only by Jökull's presentation, but also by the similarly unprepossessing Þorsteinn Kuggason, who is introduced as an *ofstopamaðr* ('rambunctious/overbearing man'), and by the generations of vikings and legendary ancestors found in chapters 1–13.<sup>514</sup>

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<sup>508</sup> Grettir refuses to accept compensation from Björn in Norway: ÍF 7, chs. 21–2.

<sup>509</sup> Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, p. 30.

<sup>510</sup> Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, p. 302.

<sup>511</sup> ÍF 7, 117: 'a big man and strong and the most arrogant of men; he was a sailor and was very overbearing, but was still a doughty man.'

<sup>512</sup> Poole, 'Myth, Psychology, and Society', p. 7.

<sup>513</sup> ÍF 7, 117: 'and moreover it is better to pit oneself against tough men rather than such a monster.'

<sup>514</sup> ÍF 7, 90; Poole, 'Myth, Psychology, and Society', p. 7; Hume, 'Thematic Design', p. 478–9.

Beyond contributing to the idea that Grettir's personality results as much from nature as from nurture, the fact that the saga describes Jökull as *ofsamaðr* at this crucial point is important to our view of the ensuing fight with Glámr. Cook is again damning of Jökull, insisting that his advice to contest with men and not *óvættir* ('monstrous spirits') is unworthy of attention because he is 'not exactly in the class of wise and temperate man whose words deserve full respect.'<sup>515</sup> If this is the case, then Grettir is no different: it is one unwise, intemperate man receiving the advice of another.<sup>516</sup> Yet this is appropriate for the point in the saga at which the human quality *ofsi* is about to be eclipsed by ill-luck, fate and curses: arrogance, man-made tests and comparisons of strength will cease to be the driving force in the narrative once Grettir faces Glámr, and Jökull recognises that his nephew is about to lose control of events in his life by tackling a 'gæfuraun mikill' ('great trial of fortune').<sup>517</sup> The force of fate will have similarly tragic consequences here as in *Laxdæla saga*.

This scene, ending with Jökull's warning 'sitt er hvárt, gæfa eða gørvileikr',<sup>518</sup> is at the heart of matters: before it, *gæfa* ('fortune/luck') is a quality that is only relevant to other characters. Grettir's association with its opposite, *ógæfa*, is about to be established by his fight with Glámr, but until this point the saga has only hinted at its significance by showing, for instance, the typical sibling contrast in character introductions: Grettir's older brother Atli is a *gæfumaðr* (and so is the peaceful Auðunn).<sup>519</sup> The first indication that Grettir may be about to lose control of his story to the whims of fate comes appropriately enough from the predictions of Þórarinn spaki: 'muntu þess þurfa, at eigi sé allir ógæfumenn í þinni ferð'.<sup>520</sup> Unlike the prophecies and predictions in *Laxdæla saga*, *Grettis saga* begins its intimations that trouble is brewing with pronouncements on the development of Grettir's character (as opposed to predictions of the results of his actions), whether it is Barði forecasting a lack of *hóf* ('moderation') in his future or Þórarinn and Jökull sensing a loss of *gæfa*.

Sure enough, in the following chapter Grettir's fight with Glámr culminates in the revenant telling him: 'flest ǫll verk þín snúask þér til ógæfu ok hamingjuleysis'.<sup>521</sup> This *ógæfa* then dictates the outcome of his crucial encounter with St Óláfr, meaning that his burning of a group of Icelanders is

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<sup>515</sup> Cook, 'The Reader', p. 149.

<sup>516</sup> Interestingly, whilst Cook ignores the significance of Grettir's *ofsi*, Hermann Pálsson ignores the significance of Jökull's: *Úr hugmyndaheimi*, p. 97.

<sup>517</sup> ÍF 7, 117.

<sup>518</sup> ÍF 7, 117: 'fate and fortune are each their own things'.

<sup>519</sup> ÍF 7, 36; 43; 95; 97.

<sup>520</sup> ÍF 7, 105: 'you will need for it to be the case that not all men in your troop are without good fortune'.

<sup>521</sup> ÍF 7, 121: 'the majority of your deeds will turn against you into ill-fortune and lucklessness.'

never officially recognised as accidental.<sup>522</sup> The context of Glámr's words distinguishes them as a curse of sorts, as opposed to the more passive predictions of Þórarinn and Jökull: Þórarinn does not speak directly to Grettir, whilst Jökull speaks of the immediate issue of fighting Glámr. Glámr, on the other hand, speaks broadly of the future, his words temporarily paralysing Grettir in the moonlight as he makes assertions regarding Grettir's physical strength as well as his fated ill-luck.

Hermann Pálsson associates both *ofsi* and *ógæfa* with Christian morals. In his view, Grettir's sinful pride (*ofsi* equating to *superbia*) led him to a battle that he could not win, and he was justly punished with ill-fortune.<sup>523</sup> In this reading, Grettir is no less culpable for actions committed after his encounter with Glámr than he is beforehand: his *ógæfa* compounds his responsibility as it is a consequence of a serious character failing. This view of the didactic ethics of learned sagas can be problematized in a number of ways, however. Prior to Hermann's publications on *Grettis saga*, Peter Hallberg had already warned of the one-dimensional readings that could result from the assumption that Norse terms such as *ofsi* and *ógæfa* only had Christian moral meanings;<sup>524</sup> in a direct response to Hermann's work, Gunnar Karlsson has demonstrated the complexity of thirteenth-century Icelandic ethics.<sup>525</sup> The possibility that there is a 'medieval morality' evident in certain sagas that was in keeping with continental thinking of the time remains, but it likely was to the benefit of only a small portion of the sagas' audience.<sup>526</sup> Curses, prophecies and pride exist outside the narratives of medieval Christianity; they have always been present in storytelling and likely always will be. Where the more learned saga audience might well have enjoyed recognising proverbs translated from Latin sources, many will have found worth in the story whilst remaining in ignorance of such details. These details, one might add, could have been brought in at any stage of the story's genesis by any individual with a particular passion for such things.

When Grettir's *ógæfa* and curse are unmoored from the direct moralistic, consequential association Hermann makes between them and his *ofsi*, the narrative can be productively reinterpreted. Grettir seems to be the same sort of person even after the curse: he delights in challenges that nobody else contemplates tackling; he thinks of farm labour as boring drudgery; he is, as Hermann Pálsson notes, still called an *ójafnaðarmaður* by others.<sup>527</sup> But as an outlaw, which is

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<sup>522</sup> ÍF 7, 133–4.

<sup>523</sup> Hermann Pálsson, *Úr Hugmyndaheimi*, p. 99.

<sup>524</sup> Hallberg, 'The Concept of *gipta*'.

<sup>525</sup> Gunnar Karlsson, 'Ethics of the Icelandic Saga Authors'.

<sup>526</sup> Hermann Pálsson, *Art and Ethics*, p. 43, quoted by Gunnar Karlsson, 'Ethics of the Icelandic Saga Authors', p. 383.

<sup>527</sup> Hermann Pálsson, *Úr hugmyndaheimi*, p. 98.



what he becomes as a result of the ill-luck that follows him, he gains our sympathy more readily: his fear of the darkness and of being alone in the Icelandic wilderness is understandable, as is his devotion to his family. His shrewd mercy in the face of incompetent challengers is as endearing as his mercilessness towards a house-maid is repulsive;<sup>528</sup> as in childhood, Grettir remains a bundle of contradictions.

To return to the earlier question of whether or not objectively negative terms like *ódæll*, *ójafnaðr* and *ofsi* can be forgivable qualities in a saga character, we must be aware of all the complexities of Grettir's portrayal, not least through his interactions with others. As with Woloch's approach, it is by viewing a 'main' character through the matrix of surrounding minor characters and interactions that we learn about the main character's personality in depth.<sup>529</sup> A number of factors affect our view of Grettir: his father's cruelty as against his own personality; his arrogance as against a naïve desire to be fêted as a champion; the curse of Glámr and the wretched life of an outlaw as against his continued prickly pride. These are the tensions that embody the dialogue between narrative function and the impression of a human personality.

Those who provoke Grettir in his outlawry are not on the whole as sympathetic as Auðunn; the balance of our sympathy should shift in Grettir's favour in these encounters, whilst matters were more uncertain with Auðunn. One example will suffice here, and that is Grettir's meeting with Gísli Þorsteinsson.<sup>530</sup> Hermann Pálsson cites this a moment of damning judgement on Grettir's character, but Gísli is utterly buffoonish.<sup>531</sup> The trouble caused by Grettir to farmers is downplayed in favour of the fact that he finds a friend in Björn Hítðælakappi, and only the preening Gísli can be persuaded (by Björn's rival, Þórðr) to tackle the problem.<sup>532</sup> Like young Grettir at Auðunn's farm, Gísli dresses in his finery and rides ostentatiously past Grettir's known abode. Approached by the outlaw, Gísli exclaims: 'ofarliga mun liggja ójafnaðr í þér', but what is wrong with a lack of social reciprocity when one no longer lives within society?<sup>533</sup> Grettir humiliates Gísli, waiting for him to shed every costly

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<sup>528</sup> ÍF 7, 188–94; 220–2; 240. It should be noted that all of these scenes are framed in comedic terms, however; whilst modern sensibilities may distinguish between them it is unlikely that medieval audiences separated these burlesque encounters. Cf. Gísli Súrsson's use, abuse and alliances with a greedy slave, a mentally disabled boy and a shrewish woman: ÍF 6, 64–5; 79–84; 86–8.

<sup>529</sup> Woloch, *The One vs. the Many*: see Chapter 6 below.

<sup>530</sup> ÍF 7, 188–94.

<sup>531</sup> Hermann Pálsson, *Úr hugmyndaheimi*, p. 98.

<sup>532</sup> ÍF 7, 188.

<sup>533</sup> ÍF 7, 191: 'your inequitable behaviour is your dominant trait'.

item he has with him before whipping him raw and sending him away, with public opinion on Grettir's side and a fear of the outlaw in Gísli's mind.<sup>534</sup>

Other references to Grettir's *ójafnaðr* surface during his outlawry, but none of the instances seem to treat the quality with as much seriousness as Barði's original consternation. Skapti Þóroddsson praises Þorgils Arason's leadership in maintaining order between Grettir and the *fóstbræðir*, 'er mestir ójafnaðarmenn þykkja vera';<sup>535</sup> Skapti's phrasing is ambivalent as to whether he personally considers the outlaws *ójafnaðarmenn*, and he later becomes one of Grettir's most influential supporters.<sup>536</sup> Two men who associate with Grettir in outlawry are connected to the quality as well: the mysterious Hallmundr and treacherous Rauðskeggr. Both of their dealings with Grettir are reminders that society's borders are blurred. Grettir is in need of company when Rauðskeggr joins him, but has already been betrayed once by a fellow outlaw; Rauðskeggr inveigles his way into Grettir's trust, acknowledging that what Grettir must have heard about him via public opinion will colour his judgement ('heyrt muntu mín hafa getit um vígaferli ok ójafnað')<sup>537</sup> — no doubt these words are designed to make us, and Grettir, think of the nature of public opinion towards Grettir himself. Hallmundr, meanwhile, is killed by another outlaw to whom he intended to deny the generosity he had previously shown Grettir.<sup>538</sup> His daughter forgives Hallmundr's killer with the words 'gefisk illa ójafnaðr',<sup>539</sup> and the impression given here and in the episode with Rauðskeggr is that there ought to be honour among thieves. Whilst an outlaw's lack of *jafnaðr* may no longer be relevant to law-abiding society, beyond its boundaries a certain amount of respect and reciprocity was still expected between the outlaws themselves.

The picture of this quality and of Grettir's character that the saga gives us throughout his outlawry can be summarised with further reference to the importance of public opinion and its role in the acquisition of the right sort of ally. As noted, an outlaw can hardly be expected to behave with the *jafnaðr* ascribed to men who participate in the give and take of society. An outlaw must by necessity take goods from others without leaving payment or announcing his intentions in advance; he may kill with impunity, for he has already received the harshest sentence. But as the case of Grettir shows, it is significant from whom one takes goods, and when one decides to spare an attacker as opposed to when to strike someone down without pause for thought. Björn advises

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<sup>534</sup> ÍF 7, 193–4.

<sup>535</sup> ÍF 7, 162: 'who most people think are inequitable men'.

<sup>536</sup> ÍF 7, 177–8.

<sup>537</sup> ÍF 7, 181: 'you must have heard of my violent deeds and inequitable behaviour'.

<sup>538</sup> ÍF 7, 201.

<sup>539</sup> ÍF 7, 205: 'inequitable behaviour is badly rewarded'.

Grettir to spare Gísli, presumably because of his status; Grettir sees the advantage in leaving Snorri goði's son alive; and Skapti agrees to support Grettir because he is *stórættaðr* ('from a great family');<sup>540</sup> Þorbjörg digra overrules the legal intentions of a group of farmers who want to hang Grettir because he is 'maðr frægr ok stórættaðr, þó at hann sé eigi gæfumaðr.'<sup>541</sup>

The division of opinion concerning Grettir between his élite supporters and the farmers who suffer from his theft is encapsulated by Kate Heslop: 'Grettir as outlaw is a split character, noble by birth but living by despicable means. The unease of the Ísafjörður episode [whence Þorbjörg digra's quote comes] lies in its conflict over what standards should be applied to his behaviour: those of the farmers, to whom he is a thief, or those of his rescuer, to whom he is a remarkable man of good family.'<sup>542</sup> Taken as a whole, references to Grettir's being *ójafnaðr*, *ofsi*, *ódæll* and *ógæfa* build up a far more complex picture of morality and good social practice than readings such as Hermann Pálsson's allow for. It is important to have public opinion on your side; but such opinion only matters when the 'right' people bestow it. In outlawry reciprocal behaviour is not expected, thus describing certain behaviour as *ójafnaðr* loses the censure that it has when applied to men who have the opportunity to act otherwise. Grettir is arrogant when he goes to fight Glámr but there is no thunderclap of divine punishment: he faces a long life of hardships and adventures and he continues to act much as he has always done. In his youth, we are told first of his *ódæll* personality before we see his father's brutish treatment of him; it is difficult to evaluate where our sympathies lie in the scene with Auðunn. But later, we are told directly of the horror of the fight with Glámr and the ensuing curse, seeing afterwards his unfair brushes with bad luck in between skirmishes with petty and small-minded men like Gísli Þorsteinsson. Grettir's interactions after the curse are like the interactions of an *ekki jafnaðarmaðr* with those who are even worse; we cannot possibly, by the close of Grettir's story, feel that the *ódæll* with which Þorbjörn ǫngull is described can mean quite the same thing as it did of Grettir in his youth.<sup>543</sup>

Generally, the audience has no need to doubt the saga narrator when they tell us that a character is the bearer of one quality or another; there is certainly no reason to doubt what we were told about most of the characters discussed in Part I. When matters are more ambiguous, we have seen how the sagas can use the word of people in general to acknowledge a character's less desirable qualities whilst indicating that they are not to be judged as harshly as someone described in such terms by the narrator themselves. Yet the faith that we put in these descriptions has been

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<sup>540</sup> ÍF 7, 189; 221; 177–8.

<sup>541</sup> ÍF 7, 169: 'a well-known man, from a great family, even though he is seemingly not a fortunate man.'

<sup>542</sup> Heslop, 'Grettir in Ísafjörður', p. 234.

<sup>543</sup> ÍF 7, 226.

shown to be misleading in the case of Styrr, who is often held up as a prime example of an *ójafnaðarmaðr* despite his failure to live up to this reputation in the plot of *Eyrbyggja saga* (3.i.b). The description colours our interpretation of his appearances in the saga as much as the behaviour of Kjartan Ólafsson in *Laxdæla saga* led Byock to equate him with *ójafnaðarmenn*.<sup>544</sup> The introduction of a character might therefore be said to be an invitation to the audience to judge not only the character's actions, but also the motives and reliability of the narrator themselves. This is particularly encouraged by the combination of the structural significance of these introductory passages with the human nature of what they describe.

In Grettir's case, the connection between the quality of *ódæll* and his youth offers the prospect of change, and an audience could be expected to look out for occasions upon which this description is either confirmed or refuted as he grows up. Þorbjörn ǫngull, playing the role of the narrative catalysts discussed at 3.ii.d, is given no such dynamic a portrayal, and his late introduction to the saga leaves little time for development of the kind that Grettir can be said to undergo. The outlaw saga allows for a clear protagonist in a way that 'regional' sagas do not, and the narrative plays on the tension inherent in making its protagonist a man worthy of being depicted as a hero despite having committed a deed worthy of outlawry.

Under the curse of Glámr and enduring *ógæfa*, Grettir becomes a tragic hero, doomed no matter how many chieftains lend him their support. As in the case of *Laxdæla saga*, where the actions of all its great men are bound to the curses and prophecies that roll in following Bolli's placement with Óláfr pái and Kjartan, *Grettis saga* offers a gloss of inevitability that encourages us to overlook the human factors in the discord. One pivotal scene can be seen in two remarkably different ways: Grettir kicks a young boy whilst approaching the judgement of (future saint) Óláfr Haraldsson in an ordeal; this is the behaviour of an arrogant bully who is more interested in impressing the king than taking notice of his surroundings. Or Grettir kicks at a malicious spirit that appears during his ordeal to prevent his salvation and damn him to outlawry; this is the behaviour of a doomed individual who does all he can to save himself and who takes on beings of unimaginable evil at great personal cost.<sup>545</sup> Grettir is both of these men: but he is only both because the narrative uses not only his personality but also Glámr's curse to shape our view of him. Aspects of the traditional narrative structure combine with a nuanced imitation of human personality to create Grettir's character.

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<sup>544</sup> Byock, *Feud*, pp. 146–7.

<sup>545</sup> ÍF 7, 133.

#### 4.iii: Controlling the motivation of the plot

Grettir's lack of control over his life functions along the lines of Óláfr's lack of control in *Laxdæla saga*: Óláfr sidesteps blame for the death of his favourite son when the inescapable fate of Kjartan is mentioned, as Grettir's propensity for feats of strength and distaste for common labour is justified by the fact that ill-luck and a curse keep him in a life of one-on-one combat and elite patronage. In this interpretation, the desire to appear bound by fate must necessarily be ascribed to those who already exist in a position of influence and control. Casting Kjartan's death as an unavoidable tragedy rather than the certain result of social rivalries in a competitive, honour-based society is a technique that allows for a sympathetic portrayal of those who contribute to said rivalries, benefiting the powerful men involved more than anyone else. Yet when it comes to *Laxdæla saga*'s heroine and most eligible protagonist, who can be said to be the subject of the greater part of its tragedy,<sup>546</sup> Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir is shown in opposition to the elite men of the sagas. Here I return to *Laxdæla saga* to view the role of fate from a different perspective, before elaborating in Chapter 5 upon the problems posed by *Hrafnkels saga*'s protagonist of dubious character.

##### 4.iii.a: Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir and the perils of evaluating others

Guðrún's own role in bringing about Kjartan's death is no less significant than Bolli's, Kjartan's, Óláfr's, Þorleikr's or anybody else's.<sup>547</sup> She is one of the most intelligent women portrayed in the *Íslendingasögur* and dominates a narrative which shows more sympathy for the status of women in medieval Icelandic society than any other saga can be said to.<sup>548</sup> Her role is not in the set-up of the social situation required for conflict, however: it is a reactive role where she responds ambivalently to Kjartan's request for a promise to wait for him, seeks redress for Kjartan's parading of Hrefna and her headdress, and again for his treatment of her household. In this section of analysis I suggest that where the narrator's use of fate relieves Óláfr pái and other prominent men of control (and thus of responsibility) for what happens, Guðrún faces the struggle of someone who is comparatively disenfranchised to assert control over events wherever she is able to.

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<sup>546</sup> Auerbach, 'Female Experience'; Ármann Jakobsson, '*Laxdæla* Dreaming'.

<sup>547</sup> Louis-Jensen, 'A Good Day's Work', pp. 194–5.

<sup>548</sup> Bouman, *Patterns*, p. 114; Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion*, p. 273.

Guðrún's position in society and the accuracy of its evaluation by others are crucial to the climax of *Laxdæla saga*.<sup>549</sup> She is the only woman to be accused of *ofsi* in the *Íslendingasögur*, relating her directly to the dimensions of trouble-making personalities.<sup>550</sup> She is not introduced by the saga as such, rather she faces the opinion of her father that she is arrogant and is misjudging her own worth when she is presented with Bolli's disastrous proposal of marriage: '[þ]á munu margir menn mæla, at þetta sé meir af ofsa mælt en mikilli fyrirhyggju, ef þú neitar slíkum manni, sem Bolli er'.<sup>551</sup>

Björn Bandlien views the proposal as evidence of the necessity of ensuring a bride's consent, and of the importance of an equal, balanced marriage: '[t]he saga is pervaded by the idea that a man and woman who marry should be *jafnræði*, equals, an evaluation that should be left to the woman from the beginning of negotiations.'<sup>552</sup> The marriage is thus doomed from the outset because neither Bolli nor Ósvífr take Guðrún's own opinion into consideration and Ósvífr denies the relevance of her opinion. This is especially galling because he mentions the fact that, as a widow, Guðrún has the right to choose for herself, but then claims that as her father he will not watch her make what is in his view a decision borne of haughtiness: '[s]vá er, sem þú veizt, Bolli, at Guðrún er ekkja, ok á hon sjálf svör fyrir sér'; 'en meðan ek em uppi, þá skal ek hafa forsjá fyrir yðr börnum mínum um þá hluti, er ek kann gørr at sjá en þér'.<sup>553</sup> It is particularly ironic that Ósvífr claims to see more clearly the benefits of this match when the perceptive Óláfr pái has already offered Bolli his misgivings.

Ósvífr hands his daughter the choice and then snatches it back from her when it appears that she will not give the answer that he wants to hear; it is *ofsi* in his eyes for Guðrún to go against

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<sup>549</sup> For convenience, I here use 'climax' after Andersson, *Analytic Reading*, p. 169, although I agree with Taylor that the structure of the saga is more complex than that implies: Taylor, 'Author Involvement', p. 17.

<sup>550</sup> As well as this incident in *Laxdæla saga* she is accused of *ofsi* by her fourth husband, Þorkell Eyjólfsson, in *Fljótsdæla saga*. This happens during their disagreement over Gunnarr Piðrandabani, which is also recounted in *Laxdæla saga*, although there it becomes more Snorri's scene than Guðrún's (Gísli Sigurðsson, *Medieval Icelandic Saga*, pp. 235–7). In *Fljótsdæla saga* Þorkell's accusation of *ofsi* seems no more accurate than Ósvífr's in *Laxdæla saga*: it is the stereotyped grumbling of the henpecked husband who features only as a cameo in *Fljótsdæla saga* (ÍF 11, 288).

<sup>551</sup> ÍF 5, 129: 'then many people will say that this decision was made more in arrogance than with a great deal of forethought, if you refuse a man such as Bolli'.

<sup>552</sup> Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion*, p. 250.

<sup>553</sup> ÍF 5, 129: 'it is the case, as you know, Bolli, that Guðrún is a widow, and she can answer for herself'; 'but whilst I yet stand, I will have oversight over my children in all things where it is the case that I see more clearly than you do.'

what her father considers best for the family. Ósvífr is the only man who we see in the saga directly circumventing his daughter's opinion,<sup>554</sup> and the effect of this is to emphasise her lack of autonomy when compared with the other women in *Laxdæla saga*.<sup>555</sup> Where other women in the saga are, at least ostensibly, given more freedom to gainsay their male relatives' decisions, she is not, even as her father states that she should be able to decide as she likes. Her status as a widow remains secondary to the will of her male kin.

Ósvífr's attitude is paralleled earlier when her independence is superseded by Kjartan's wishes. In the world of *Laxdæla saga*, Guðrún's request to accompany Kjartan on his travels recalls the stories of two other independent widows: Unnr in djúpauðga and Kjartan's great grandmother, Þorgerðr Þorsteinsdóttir. But where they were able to travel freely, Guðrún is denied that by Kjartan, presumably because unlike the other women, Guðrún desires to travel in the company of a man to whom she is not yet married, as his equal. The justification that Kjartan gives for his refusal is that Guðrún must remain in Iceland to look after her male relatives; the same male relatives who are later to encourage her to marry Bolli instead of waiting for Kjartan. The course of the saga at this point is thus decided entirely without Guðrún's input; Kjartan, Bolli and Ósvífr are all able to put their own interests ahead of hers.<sup>556</sup>

Guðrún's most remarkable feature is her intelligence,<sup>557</sup> but her father sees only her external value when he misjudges her for the first time and marries her to Þorvaldr with assurances of gifts whenever she desires them. To him Bolli's proposal is another opportunity for her to marry into a wealthy family and thereby increase the standing of her own kin; but the mismatch in status between Bolli and Kjartan is made painfully clear when Kjartan gazumps Bolli's offer for the land at Sælingsdalstunga.<sup>558</sup> In other scenes it is evident that the men around her ought rather to value Guðrún's sense and strong will, as Snorri tells Þorkell Eyjólfsson: 'máttu sjá, hversu mikill skörungr Guðrún er, ef hon berr okkr báða ráðum.'<sup>559</sup>

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<sup>554</sup> Sometimes in an unsuccessful marriage we are not told whether or not the woman was asked for her consent (Geirmundr's marriage to Þuríðr Óláfsdóttir) and sometimes we know later, or indirectly, that she wasn't (as in the example of Vígdís and Þórðr goddi), but only Ósvífr and Guðrún's disagreement is related directly.

<sup>555</sup> Bandlien, *Strategies of Passion*, p. 244.

<sup>556</sup> See also Auerbach, 'Female Experience', p. 39.

<sup>557</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, '*Laxdæla* Dreaming', p. 178.

<sup>558</sup> Byock, *Feud*, pp. 145–6.

<sup>559</sup> ÍF 5, 203: 'you may see for yourself how formidable Guðrún is, if she is able to advise the both of us.' See also Auerbach, 'Female Experience', *passim*.

At a pivotal moment in the saga a crucial error of evaluation is made, which would not have had such an effect had *ofsi* not been something serious for Guðrún to avoid. Yet in seeking to avoid this label by agreeing to her father's wishes, Guðrún contributes to the situation that will bring about Kjartan's death.<sup>560</sup> The difficulty of discerning individual narrative triggers in *Laxdæla saga* has been made evident throughout this chapter, but this scene between Guðrún and her father points to the social and narrative implications of an incorrect evaluation of someone else's character.

Unlike Óláfr pái, who perhaps ought to have more control over events in the saga than he seems to given his status and power, Guðrún is denied her autonomy twice regarding marriage proposals and once regarding travelling as a widow. Ármann Jakobsson reads her four dreams as indicators of the control that she takes over her life.<sup>561</sup> However, I would argue that the dreams represent a desire to feign control where it is lacking. Although fate is invoked to absolve Óláfr, Bolli and Kjartan of some of their culpability for what happens, it grants Guðrún the illusion of control and independence. This is especially so when she seizes the opportunity to bring her first marriage to an end whilst simultaneously destroying the marriage of Þórðr Ingunnarson, the man she is determined to have instead. Similarly, control is essential to her marriages to Bolli and Þorkell: by her will Bolli joins her brothers against Kjartan, but it is only afterwards that she says in relief, 'þykki mér nú þat vitat, at þú vill ekki gera í móti skapi mínu.'<sup>562</sup> Where control over her life and its events might truly have made a difference to the narrative outcome (accompanying Kjartan or refusing Bolli outright), she does not wield it and she is overruled.

#### 4.iii.b: *Laxdæla saga*: from fate to feud

It has often been observed that *Laxdæla saga*'s tone changes drastically following Kjartan's death.<sup>563</sup> It is at this point that the repeated indications and predictions of Kjartan's doom come to fruition and the narrative is gripped by a different force: the obligations of feud.<sup>564</sup> In this part of the

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<sup>560</sup> Cf. Hallgerðr Høskuldsdóttir's reluctance to marry and her father's accusation of *ofmetnað* ('pride/arrogance') in *Njáls saga*: ÍF 12, 31.

<sup>561</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, '*Laxdæla* Dreaming', pp. 188–9.

<sup>562</sup> ÍF 5, 155: 'it seems to me to have been established that you will not go against my intentions.'

<sup>563</sup> Andersson, *Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Saga*, p. 141; Bredsdorff, *Chaos and Love*, pp. 45–6; Dronke, 'Narrative Insight', p. 209; Taylor, 'Author Involvement', p. 17.

<sup>564</sup> Although the feud only really begins after Óláfr's death, emphasising both his connection to the 'noble father' trope mentioned at 4.i.b, and to the part of the narrative most heavily beholden to fate.



saga there are two more accusations of *ójafnaðr* and another two of *ofsi*, indicating their connection with social, often politically motivated upheaval.

- Þorgils Hølluson, Guðrún's suitor: accused of being *ójafnaðr*.
- Þorsteinn Kuggason: accused of being both *ójafnaðr* and *ofsi*.
- Guðrún's fourth husband, Þorkell Eyjólfsson: associated with *ofsi* by King Óláfr Haraldsson.

Additionally, this part of the saga features Helgi Harðbeinsson, cast as a *berserkr* by Guðrún, and a cameo by self-professed *engi dældarmaðr*, Víga-Hrappr the younger.<sup>565</sup> None of these descriptions are given directly by the saga narrator and all but Víga-Hrappr are judged as such by others, although these appraisals are more reliable than Ósvífr's assessment of Guðrún can be said to be.

Þorgils is accused of being *ójafnaðr* for having taken another's *goðorð* and his plot runs outside the narrative about Guðrún and concerns only Snorri goði.<sup>566</sup> Similarly, whilst Þorsteinn Kuggason is undoubtedly deserving of the threat '[b]oløx mun standa í hofði þér af inum versta manni ok steypa svá ofsa þínum ok ójafnaði' for presuming to strong-arm Halldórr Ólafsson into giving up the land at Hjarðarholt,<sup>567</sup> this scene is not followed up in the story told by *Laxdæla saga*. Yet Þorgils and Þorsteinn appear in close proximity elsewhere in the tradition, where *Eyrbyggja saga* ominously informs us: 'Snorri goði bjó í Tungu tuttugu vetr, ok hafði hann first heldr qfundsaamt setr, meðan þeir lifðu stórbokkarnir, Þorsteinn Kuggason ok Þorgils Hølluson'.<sup>568</sup> Snorri goði's role in *Laxdæla saga* grows as the feud spreads, and he further undermines Guðrún's control over events (albeit as a friend and ally) by organising her fourth marriage, by taking over the orchestration of revenge for Bolli's death and by advising and fostering her sons.<sup>569</sup> Although the saga does return to focus on Guðrún in her old age, in between Bolli's death and Þorkell's death Snorri vies strongly with her for the narrative spotlight, and in this section of *Laxdæla saga* the violent, political machinations

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<sup>565</sup> ÍF 5, 180; 90.

<sup>566</sup> ÍF 5, 197.

<sup>567</sup> ÍF 5, 220: 'a wood-axe will stand itself in your head, wielded by the worst of men, and thus it will put an end to your arrogance and inequitable behaviour'.

<sup>568</sup> ÍF 4, 180: 'Snorri goði lived at Tungu for twenty years, and at first he had to endure a great deal of envy whilst the dominant men Þorsteinn Kuggason and Þorgils Hølluson still lived'. Cf. ÍF 5, 220 n. 3: Einar Ól. Sveinsson suggests that the threat of an axe to the head is a prophetic line that relates to the circumstances of Þorsteinn's death (not recorded in any surviving source).

<sup>569</sup> See also Gísli Sigurðsson's comparison of scenes in *Laxdæla saga*, *Gunnars þáttr Þiðrandabana* and *Fljótsdæla saga*: *Medieval Icelandic Saga*, pp. 230–7.

that follow him are accompanied by a higher frequency of characters that are described as disruptive.<sup>570</sup>

Þorleikr Hǫskuldsson remains the only character whose lack of *jafnaðr* is referenced by the saga itself, and it is thus to him that I have looked for *Laxdæla saga*'s narrative catalyst. Kathryn Hume warned that '[t]he difficulties inherent in starting and ending a narrative increase with the degree of mimetic accuracy sought, since absolutely first causes or utterly final effects are not found in real life', and indeed *Laxdæla saga* makes it difficult to identify a 'first cause' for the conflict between Kjartan, Bolli and Guðrún.<sup>571</sup> The saga uses repeated themes such as the strife between half-brothers Hǫskuldr and Hrútr and Þorleikr and Óláfr to allude to the foster-brothers Kjartan and Bolli's rivalry; Guðrún's limited freedom is contrasted with Unnr and Þorgerðr's independence; fate, prophecies, curses and dreams also remind us that this is an artfully constructed narrative and not simply an imitation of real life. Thus whilst real life may not offer simple beginnings for conflicts, *Laxdæla saga* crafts a world of contradictions, in which fate is offered as the simplest cause through repeated, complex scenarios that simultaneously appear true to the messy nature of human life: a marriage gone wrong, a deal gone sour, a misunderstanding between relatives, a chance meeting at the hot springs.<sup>572</sup>

Although *Grettis saga* is a different type of story, focussing on the individual hero for the majority of its narrative, a similar series of tensions informs its construction. Grettir's personality, partly formed by our interpretation of his introduction, partly formed by his father's treatment of him, leads him into situations where other characters interpret his actions as those of an *ójafnaðarmaðr* — but his supernatural encounter with Glámr and the curse that he receives place him beyond the part of society where this has a bearing. The element of fate elevates Grettir's story from one of sociopathic tendencies to one of missed opportunities, misunderstandings and lonely but lofty adventures.

Without fate to tell us that the events of *Laxdæla saga* are inevitable, the human interactions in the saga provide a subtler warning of the precarious nature of peace. The three fathers, Þorleikr, Óláfr and Ósvífr, each contribute to the problems of the next generation (as Ásmundr hærulangr's treatment of Grettir recalls Ásmundr's own difficult relationship with his

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<sup>570</sup> Cf. Bredsdorff's discomfort with Þorgils' killing: *Chaos and Love*, pp. 45–6.

<sup>571</sup> Hume, 'Beginnings and Endings', p. 593.

<sup>572</sup> Vésteinn Ólason distinguishes foreboding conversations from active prophecy, saying of them that they '[reveal] the emotional conflict of characters at a fateful moment; the feelings derive from the past and the events have implications for the future.' *Dialogues with the Viking Age*, p. 98. Narratively, the effects remain similar.

father).<sup>573</sup> Þorleikr thinks of none but himself and how he compares to his noble relatives — as Bolli does when he circumvents Kjartan's expectations of marrying Guðrún. Óláfr equivocates and hopes that all will be resolved peacefully — as Kjartan does when Guðrún responds coolly to his decision to go abroad alone. Ósvífr fails to recognise the true value and status of his own daughter, as do his sons; Guðrún herself is trapped by his decisions.

Þorleikr has the most in common with the narrative catalysts discussed in 3.ii.b–c. The conflict he is involved in is episodic; he leaves the saga when his role is complete; but the social effects are lasting, even if they cannot be said to be the only factor affecting ensuing conflict. Guðrún and the threat of being labelled with *ofsi* forms a pivotal moment; the fear of being seen to be disruptive in this manner leads her to acquiesce to her father's and Bolli's wishes, bringing conflict a step closer. Similarly *ofsi* underpins the pivotal scene in *Grettis saga* that leads him to his fight with Glámr; but perhaps the fear of Barði's prediction that he will be an *ójafnaðarmaðr* leads him to the decision to differentiate himself from his uncle Jökull by fighting supernatural beings instead of men.

Like Hörðr, Grettir triggers his own narrative: the impulse to tell the story is centred on him and his actions.<sup>574</sup> The conflict, or shift in social or political dynamics, that an *ójafnaðarmaðr* would otherwise trigger is bound to the outlaw hero himself. Hörðr's future has been predicted; he gains a dubious ally in the form of Helgi; he performs an act that leads to his outlawry. Grettir behaves in a boisterous, arrogant manner that does not sit well with Norwegian or Icelandic society; he is cursed by a supernatural being; he performs an act that leads to his outlawry. In these stories Helgi and Glámr come closest to performing the role of a narrative catalyst, but owing to the ambiguous personalities of these sagas' heroes we cannot be certain that a similar responsibility may not be laid at the feet of Grettir and Hörðr themselves.

Both of the sagas discussed in this chapter concern themselves with the way in which violent personalities amongst the élite can be described, managed and interpreted. This was undoubtedly a relevant concern amongst the audiences of the thirteenth century, when most sagas are assumed to have crystallised into the forms we now have them in. *Laxdæla saga* deals with Þorleikr in a conventional manner, exiling him once his actions go beyond the pale, although for modern audiences, doubts and unease remain about the actions of Óláfr, Kjartan, Bolli and Ósvífr. *Grettis saga* presents us with a scenario whereby the most noble and heroic of all the saga's cast is simultaneously its most difficult personality, which is not unusual for the genre of outlaw sagas. Next, however, I will turn to the elephant in the room: *Hrafnkels saga*. When the saga's main

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<sup>573</sup> ÍF 7, 34.

<sup>574</sup> 3.ii.d, p. 111.

character is its *ójafnaðarmaður*, how are his actions and the consequent public reactions portrayed? Opinion on the character of Hrafnkell and the (moral) message of his saga are divided, so in Chapter 5 I will explore the saga's portrayal of him in more detail, asking whether (and if so how) the narrative manages the audience's expectations of and reactions to its characters.

## 5: PERSPECTIVES ON PAYBACK IN *HRAFNKELS SAGA*

Hrafnkell Freysgoði is a major character who is yet to be examined in this thesis. In this chapter I address the use of socially disruptive qualities across *Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða*, exploring the chain of events recounted through the lenses of obligation, reciprocity and personal cost. Although the narrators of *Grettis saga* and *Fóstbræðra saga* flirt with assigning the quality of *ójafnaðr* to their protagonists, it is explicitly stated by *Hrafnkels saga* within the opening chapters that its eponymous protagonist, the chieftain Hrafnkell Hallfreðarson, ‘var ójafnaðarmaðr mikill’.<sup>575</sup> As is well-known, Hrafnkell survives and ultimately triumphs over his rivals, marking him out as unique amongst *ójafnaðarmenn* and encouraging us to question the sagas’ depiction of personality.

Building on the observations already made regarding both the structural conventions of the sagas (as demonstrated in Part I) and the individualistic, character-led approach taken in Chapter 4, section 5.i positions Hrafnkell’s introduction in the context of criteria first examined in Chapter 2 (5.i.a). I then develop a picture of the wider sphere of interactions between characters in *Hrafnkels saga* (5.i.b). Having laid out the structural foundations for the saga’s cast of characters, in 5.ii I turn to a more detailed consideration of scenes in the saga, specifically those that can be considered trigger points in motivating the forward movement of the plot (5.ii.a) and the various attempts to bring an end to conflict between parties (5.ii.b). My conclusions at 5.iii and 5.iv offer a new perspective on the underlying social concerns represented by the saga’s narrative and draw together the themes of fate, public opinion and self-determination and evaluation explored throughout Chapters 3 and 4.

### *5.i: The character-system of Hrafnkels saga*

As in Chapter 3, where I linked a study of the interaction between a set of characters to the structure of *Eyrbyggja saga*, here too I will give a brief assessment of character interactions in *Hrafnkels saga*. The introduction of the *ójafnaðarmaðr* is examined in relation to the introductions discussed in Part I, followed by an analysis of the way in which the saga problematizes its protagonist by subverting audience expectations. This section builds on Woloch’s idea of the character-system by reading

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<sup>575</sup> ÍF 11, 99: ‘was a very inequitable man’.

significance into the way in which characters are introduced and the ways in which they relate to each other throughout the narrative.<sup>576</sup>

Whilst even the most positively depicted characters in *Laxdæla saga* have attracted condemnation from modern readers,<sup>577</sup> the extent to which every actor in *Hrafnkels saga* has been judged and found wanting is far beyond that of *Laxdæla saga*. Yet for every criticism the opposite view has been expressed; initially, Hrafnkell's introduction as an *ójafnaðarmaður*, pagan, duellist and refuser of compensation is enough to mark him out as trouble for most readers, but a major question of scholarship has been the extent to which his punishment at Sámur's hands (and ensuing abandonment of the pagan gods) changes him, and in what light he should be viewed at the close of the saga.<sup>578</sup> Þorbjörn has been criticised for his greed and indecisiveness, whilst also receiving praise for what has been seen as a demonstration of humility at the Alþingi;<sup>579</sup> the Þjóstarssynir are either cynical glory-hunters or charitable freelancers depending upon one's stance,<sup>580</sup> whilst Sámur is either a preening fool or a merciful optimist.<sup>581</sup> His brother Eyvindr was seen as an innocent victim up until Frederick J. Heinemann's 1974 article lambasting the character as a proud, vain and foolhardy provocateur.<sup>582</sup> Even the *gríðkona* ('house-maid') who tells Hrafnkell of Eyvindr's presence has been interpreted in a number of ways, from necessary inciter to comic stereotype.<sup>583</sup> Given Vésteinn

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<sup>576</sup> Woloch, *The One vs. The Many*, p. 18; 3.i.b, p. 72, n. 272.

<sup>577</sup> 4.i.a, p. 123, n. 452.

<sup>578</sup> There is a vast amount of research on this saga which will be addressed in detail where appropriate in this chapter. For a relatively recent summary of different attitudes to Hrafnkell's character see Andersson, *Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, p. 181, n. 10.

<sup>579</sup> Bonner and Grimstad focus on the early stages of the saga and demonstrate Þorbjörn's lack of judgement ('A Closer Look at Dialogues'); Hermann Pálsson is an advocate for Þorbjörn's humility later in the saga (*Art and Ethics*, p. 59).

<sup>580</sup> See especially Bolton, 'The heart of *Hrafnkatla*' for a negative view of Þorkell Þjóstarsson; Poole, 'Counsel in Action' and Hermann Pálsson, *Art and Ethics*, pp. 67–8 take a more positive view.

<sup>581</sup> Arnold, *Post-Classical Saga*, p. 134 sees little to recommend Sámur; yet again Hermann Pálsson is the clearest advocate for a positive view of Sámur (*Art and Ethics*, p. 44) although he then contradicts this positive interpretation (*Art and Ethics*, pp. 53–6).

<sup>582</sup> Heinemann, '*Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða* and type-scene analysis'; one only has to read the reply to this article by Peter Hallberg to get a sense of how different an interpretation it was from established thinking regarding Eyvindr (Hallberg, '*Hrafnkell Freysgoði the "new man"*'). Heinemann's suggestion of Eyvindr's culpability has gained traction since, however: see, for example, Arnold, *Post-Classical Saga*, p. 136.

<sup>583</sup> Slater, 'From rhetoric and structure', p. 46 takes a conservative view of the woman's role; Fulk, 'The Moral System', p. 30, n. 15 regards her as particularly comic.

Ólason's assertion that '[c]haracterisation is inextricably linked to morality' it is no wonder that the motives and psychology of this cast have been argued over as doggedly as the meaning and message of the saga itself.<sup>584</sup>

#### *5.i.a: The place of the protagonist in the narrative set-up*

In Part I, characters from the corpus of those described by the narrator as *ójafnaðarmenn* were omitted if the description came only *after* their introduction to the saga. There is significance in the diffuse portrait that the opening two chapters of *Hrafnkels saga* provides its hero with: strictly speaking Hrafnkell's introduction makes no mention of his being *ójafnaðr*: '...sá maðr kom skipi sínu til Íslands í Breiðdal, er Hallfreðr hét. Þat er fyrir neðan Fljótsdalshérað. Þar var á skipi kona hans ok sonr, er Hrafnkell hét. Hann var þá fimmtán vetra gamall, mannvænn ok gørviligr.'<sup>585</sup> As with the introductions discussed in Chapter 2, there is mention of the wider family group (his mother and father, who himself is fleshed out to a small degree in the first episode of the saga); the land associated with this family; and, as is common with first generation settlers, their ship-voyage is preceded by the explanation that it was made during the reign of Haraldr hárfagri. Hrafnkell himself is situated chronologically by his age and described in terms that any well-to-do young man in the sagas might be described. He comes into his own in the following chapter, when upon exploring the local land for himself he resolves to set up his own farm in a previously unsettled valley. It is once this has been achieved that the saga gives us a fuller description of its protagonist:<sup>586</sup>

Hrafnkell fekk Oddbjargar Skjöldólfsdóttur ór Laxárdal. Þau áttu tvá sonu. Hét inn ellri Þórir, en inn yngri Ásbjörn. En þá er Hrafnkell hafði land numit á Aðalbóli, þá efldi hann blót mikil. Hrafnkell lét gera hof mikit. Hrafnkell elskaði eigi annat goð meir en Frey, ok honum gaf hann alla in beztu gripi sína hálfa við sik. Hrafnkell byggði allan dalinn ok gaf mönnum land, en vildi þó vera yfirmaðr þeira ok tók goðorð yfir þeim. Við þetta var lengt nafn hans ok kallaðr Freysgoði, ok var

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<sup>584</sup> Vésteinn Ólason, *Dialogues with the Viking Age*, p. 165.

<sup>585</sup> ÍF 11, 97: 'this man brought his ship to Iceland into Breiðdalur, who was called Hallfreðr. That is just below the district of Fljótsdalur. On-board ship were his wife and son, who was called Hrafnkell. He was fifteen years old, promising and able.'

<sup>586</sup> Whilst I do not agree entirely with the positive view of Hrafnkell, Johansen, 'The Hero of *Hrafnkels saga*', offers a thorough argument for viewing him as the saga's hero.

ójafnaðarmaðr mikill, en mennt vel. Hann þrængdi undir sik Jökulsdalsmönnum til þingmanna hans, var linr ok blíðr við sína men, en stríðr ok stirðlyndr við Jökulsdalsmenn, ok fengu af honum engan jafnað. Hrafnkell stóð mjök í einvígjum ok bætti engan mann fé, því at engi fekk af honum neinar bætr, hvat sem hann gerði.<sup>587</sup>

The format of this description brings to mind Snorri goði's extended profile in *Eyrbyggja saga*, in which he is introduced at first as Þorgrímr Þorgrímsson, before being renamed Snorri because of his temperament.<sup>588</sup> In the following chapter, aged fourteen, Snorri travels abroad, returning at fifteen to trick his uncle into selling him the farm at Helgafell and allowing him to establish himself independently. It is only after this that the saga gives us a fuller description of his appearance and personality.<sup>589</sup> This gives the impression of a formative experience in between the two descriptions: Snorri's is his trip to Norway, Hrafnkell's is simply his lone ride onto the heath from which he first sights Hrafnkelsdalur. Landscape is undeniably significant within *Hrafnkels saga* and it might be argued that this episode suggests a connection between Hrafnkell and Hrafnkelsdalur that not even outlawry can sever; he first sights it and sees its potential, therefore it is his right to return to it.<sup>590</sup>

Like Snorri and, to an extent, Þorleikr Høskuldsson, Hrafnkell's introduction and follow-up description creates a picture of the man that goes beyond the static image found in many other examples. He is first said to be promising and then we see how this promise emerges in the figure of a fervent worshipper of Freyr: a duellist and a man who does not treat others equally. Yet the details are contradictory from the outset,<sup>591</sup> for in any other character's biography the worship of Freyr and

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<sup>587</sup> ÍF 11, 98–9: 'Hrafnkell married Oddbjörg Skjöldólfsdóttir from Laxárdalur. They had two sons. The elder was called Þórir, and the younger Ásbjörn. But then when Hrafnkell had claimed land at Aðalból, then he practiced great sacrifices. Hrafnkell had a great temple built. Hrafnkell loved no god more than Freyr, and he gave to him half of all of his finest treasures. Hrafnkell settled the whole valley and gave men land, but wanted to be their superior and took a chieftaincy over them. Because of that his name was extended and he was called Freysgoði, and he was a very inequitable man, but he was well accomplished. He brought the men of Jökulsdalur under him to be his þingmenn, was agreeable and pleasant with his men, but strict and harsh to the men of Jökulsdalur, who got no justice from him. Hrafnkell fought often in single-combat and paid no man money, because no one got compensation from him, no matter what he had done.'

<sup>588</sup> ÍF 4, 20.

<sup>589</sup> ÍF 4, 22–7. 2.ii.d, p. 60.

<sup>590</sup> Hermann Pálsson, *Art and Ethics*, pp. 33–9.

<sup>591</sup> Heinemann, 'Skömm er óhófs ævi', p. 94; Bonner and Grimstad, 'A Closer Look at Dialogues', p. 11.



practice of *blót* ('sacrifice') would instantly lead us to assume evil from them.<sup>592</sup> In conjunction with being an *ójafnaðarmaðr* and duellist, this should be a damning description. But he is of course also 'linr ok blíðr' ('agreeable and pleasant') and 'mennt vel' ('well accomplished'). The allusion to his promise in the first introduction implies the progression of time just as much as the fact that the quality *ódæll* is associated with Grettir's youth (4.ii). As well as this sense of a character coming into his own, we are given the information that his contradictory nature in adulthood is associated with his relationship to other people. He distinguishes between a group to whom he gave land, and a group over whom he took power; this is part of the uneven nature of the *ójafnaðarmaðr* perhaps, but it is also an indication of how Hrafnkell will interact with his neighbours throughout the saga.

In Gaskins' concept of saga openings there must be an equilibrium, a 'once-upon-a-time' before disruption occurs at the behest of an individual.<sup>593</sup> These opening chapters serve to establish what exactly the state of narrative equilibrium consists of and they are devoted entirely to Hrafnkell and his family. There is no mention of rival chieftains, no detail of how one becomes a chieftain, or why the inhabitants of the previously settled area of Jökulsdalur merited such harsh treatment. In the saga's establishment of its setting all we need to know is that Hrafnkell claimed land, distributed land and asserted authority over a number of people; and that nobody could challenge him in this.

Once more, this situation demonstrates the paradoxical nature of the character introduction, and indeed of story beginnings. The introduction itself, and the description of Hrafnkell that follows it, are part of the set-up for the narrative, thus they embody the equilibrium that comes before the actions of the plot change this initial state of social and personal relations. But how can the pre-disruption state exist when it already contains disruptive figures? Just as a character introduction can be viewed either as a description of inherent personality traits or a pseudo-prophetic nod towards the events that follow, and trouble that is perpetrated by a particular character (2.iii), so the saga's opening appears as a stable state that nevertheless accommodates a chieftain who duels and refuses to pay compensation.

Hrafnkell's twofold introduction and description is therefore significant because of the time that elapses, hinting at his development without showing it, and because of the dominance that it lends him during the establishing stages of the narrative. In some sagas this establishing stage covers generations (for example *Laxdæla saga*, *Eyrbyggja saga*); in others it is barely encapsulated in a few important character introductions before the plot swings into motion (*Hávarðar saga*, *Ljósvetninga*

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<sup>592</sup> The Þórr-worshippers in *Eyrbyggja saga* are in the prologue to the main action, which begins with Snorri's maturation. Descriptions of sacrifices are depersonalised and not attributed directly by the saga to either Þórólfr Mostrarskegg or his son Þorsteinn Þorskabítr: ÍF 4, 8–9; 18. Cf. Þórólfr heljarskinn, 3.ii.c, p. 107.

<sup>593</sup> 1.iii, p. 15.

*saga*). The point at which this narrative equilibrium is disturbed is naturally different in each case, a point to which I will return at 5.ii.

*5.i.b: Narrative perspective and problematizing the protagonist*

Immediately after Hrafnkell's extended introduction, the saga turns not to Einarr and Þorbjörn, but to the family of the man who will briefly usurp Hrafnkell's position. Sámr is himself described in terms that are familiar to disruptive figures. He is introduced as an *uppivözlumaðr* ('rambunctious man') and later Þorbjörn claims that he is 'hávaðamestr ór ætt várri.'<sup>594</sup> Recalling the semantics of these terms — an individual who wades against strong currents — it is immediately clear how appropriate they are to Sámr.<sup>595</sup> The label fits, whether we take a sympathetic view of his actions and see him wading against a tide of injustice by standing up to Hrafnkell, or assume him to be a foolish upstart, ambitious but incompetent. This ambivalence mirrors that of Hrafnkell's introduction as the saga's *ójafnaðarmaðr*. Who is an audience to favour in the stand-off between two characters described and depicted in this way? As Henry Kratz observed:

For the tendency of the medieval writer, and indeed, of most writers of all times, is to chronicle the adventures of sympathetic protagonists against unsympathetic antagonists, where the right is always on the side of the protagonists; or to see people and events from a moralistic point of view; events that demonstrate a moral judgement, or a moral judgement that is illustrated by certain events. But in *Hrafnkels saga* we have the protagonists changing places with the antagonists, and one moral judgement being replaced by another.<sup>596</sup>

This structural flexibility or ambiguity is emphasised by the saga's shifts in perspective throughout the events it describes. Our empathy is generally excited by the characters whose actions we witness 'first hand', but *Hrafnkels saga* makes more of a problem of this than many *Íslendingasögur*, not least in the scenes at the Alþingi.

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<sup>594</sup> ÍF 11, 100; 108: 'the most aggressively ambitious of our kin-group'.

<sup>595</sup> 2.ii.d, pp. 62–3.

<sup>596</sup> Kratz, 'Thirteenth-Century Fiction?', pp. 443–4.

These particular scenes have been described as the ‘heart’ of *Hrafnkels saga*, and the rhetoric of their remarkably high percentage of direct dialogue has been scrutinised.<sup>597</sup> The Alþingi is, not coincidentally, the location of the most interaction between members of the saga’s small cast. The effect of this is that the protagonist of *Hrafnkels saga* is forced to the edge of the narrative for a great deal of the action against him.

From the death of Einarr, the narrative perspective stays almost entirely with Þorbjörn and Sámur until after Hrafnkell’s outlawry. Given the emphasis on Hrafnkell in the saga’s introductory chapters, this is a significant shift. Throughout it he becomes a distant figure as the memory of his generous offer to Þorbjörn is gradually forgotten.<sup>598</sup> Our sympathy for the hopeless old man that Þorbjörn has become eclipses earlier doubts regarding his judgement; Hrafnkell’s regret and generous offer are lost behind his arrogant dismissal of the case.<sup>599</sup>

Although the saga parallels both Hrafnkell’s and Sámur’s journeys to the Alþingi with their supporters, the detail is with Sámur and we only get the occasional snapshot of Hrafnkell’s reactions: ‘Hrafnkell spyr þetta ok þótti hlægiligt’; ‘[h]onum þótti þat hlægiligt’.<sup>600</sup> Everything about his muster of men is routine, whereas Sámur’s is unusual from its inclusion of *einhleypingar* (‘unattached men’) and route used, to the location he chooses to pitch his booth at the assembly. At the assembly we meet the saga’s new cast members only as Sámur meets them, observing their dialogue (thick with first-person pronouns) as the momentum of the case builds. The first direct encounter between Hrafnkell and any of his enemies is the court of confiscation, at which he is utterly vulnerable in the hands of the victors Sámur, Þorkell and Þorgeirr. In the intervening period, the system of human interactions has grown without his involvement, spreading from Þorbjörn to Sámur to Þorkell to Þorgeirr and thus to the crowds at the assembly and the wider public. The matrix of alliances that builds up encloses Hrafnkell until he escapes into outlawry and renewed independence.

The saga does not say whether Sámur and Þorbjörn ever tell their powerful backers of the generous offer made by Hrafnkell and subsequently refused.<sup>601</sup> The public appearance of this dispute is therefore that Þorbjörn and Sámur are seeking redress against the *ójafnaðarmaður* who does not pay compensation. It has been observed that Þorbjörn never speaks another word after his breakdown at the Alþingi, and the result of this is that his earlier behaviour is easier to forget for the

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<sup>597</sup> Bolton, ‘The Heart of *Hrafnkatla*’; Heinemann, ‘The Heart of *Hrafnkatla* Again’; Hallberg, ‘Hunting for the Heart of *Hrafnkatla*’; Dubs, ‘Discourse of Persuasion’.

<sup>598</sup> Dubs, ‘Discourse of Persuasion’, pp. 467–9.

<sup>599</sup> Cf. Kratz, ‘Thirteenth-Century Fiction?’, pp. 440–1.

<sup>600</sup> ÍF 11, 108–9: ‘Hrafnkell was told about this and thought it was laughable’; ‘it was laughable to him’.

<sup>601</sup> Johansen, ‘The Hero of *Hrafnkels saga*’, p. 280.

audience.<sup>602</sup> He originally told Sámur of the offer made, but its terms are not reiterated by the narrator: the saga simply summarises that Sámur was told ‘allt it sanna’ (‘everything in truth’), without repeating the generous terms offered.<sup>603</sup> In this sense, because the reader or audience does not receive a direct reiteration of the deal, the character of Sámur is not as contaminated by association with the rejected offer as Þorbjörn is.<sup>604</sup> Following on from this, Sámur’s apparent omission of the information in his dealings with the Þjóstarssynir creates new interactions that are completely free of the knowledge of Hrafnkell’s offer.

For his part, Hrafnkell plays up to the role assigned to him, acting as though he had never made the offer to Þorbjörn. It is significant that when matters come to a head the chieftain resorts to his old tactics, intending to use force to break up the case.<sup>605</sup> This fails, so he ignores events as he had attempted to do until Sámur’s prosecution, returning home where he ‘lét sem ekki hefði í orðit’.<sup>606</sup> The general opinion of those at the assembly is therefore shaped by the fact that the case is seen in terms beneficial to the plucky underdogs, and when Hrafnkell is outlawed, the saga tells us: ‘morgum monnum þykkir vel, þó at þann veg hafi at borizk, at Hrafnkell hafi hneykju farit, ok minnask nú, at hann hefir morgum ójafnað sýnt’.<sup>607</sup>

Here the significance of public opinion is clear. For Hrafnkell, whose *ójafnaðr* had settled into the equilibrium of this saga’s set-up — the everyday life of its loosely sketched-out community — it is particularly dangerous that the public have had their attention drawn back to his previous behaviour in the context of this new offence. One might characterise the situation as one in which the public realise (or recall) that they should not simply expect to live with the kind of tyranny that Hrafnkell is said to be guilty of.

Hrafnkell is therefore tried as an *ójafnaðarmaðr* and placed in the narrative context of the villains who are introduced as such during the prelude to action in the sagas. Usually, these characters are killed or outlawed, and this is what we would normally expect for Hrafnkell at this point. Such an outcome might pave the way for the saga to introduce his sons more fully, or might be presented simply as a triumph for Sámur; either such outcome would force us to recast the saga’s protagonist. There is nothing inherent in the narrative to this point that indicates that Sámur will

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<sup>602</sup> Bolton, ‘The Heart of *Hrafnkatla*’, p. 37.

<sup>603</sup> ÍF 11, 107.

<sup>604</sup> Dubs, ‘Discourse of Persuasion’, p. 467.

<sup>605</sup> ÍF 11, 117.

<sup>606</sup> *Ibid.*: ‘carried on as though nothing had happened’.

<sup>607</sup> *Ibid.*: ‘many people thought well of the way things had turned out, that Hrafnkell had been defeated, and now they remembered that he had displayed inequitable behaviour towards many’.

grant the *ójafnaðarmaðr* clemency, nor that at the close of the saga Hrafnkell will be back in control of Aðalból.

This is the result of distancing Hrafnkell so effectively during the events of the Alþingi. His involvement in the build-up to it is solely about giving context to Sámr's activities: Sámr is all action whilst Hrafnkell represents inaction. When it comes to the prosecution of the case itself, although Sámr is reported to have spoken well, there is no dialogue until the case has been closed (a point of note in a saga so dialogue-heavy).<sup>608</sup> Yet not even indirect words are attributed to Hrafnkell in response to Sámr's prosecution, and it is only the victors who speak following the case. Thus Hrafnkell is kept shut out of the narrative, just as he is shut out of the Alþingi, and his silence has the ring of justice to it.

Hrafnkell is noticeably held at a distance on other occasions.<sup>609</sup> For instance: the scene in which Einarr finds himself obliged to ride Freyfaxi or lose the sheep; Eyvindr's fatal journey to Hrafnkelsdalur; and also Sámr's final meeting with the Þjóstarssynir. These scenes all problematize our reading of the saga. In the first instance, we see Einarr's dilemma from his point of view, including Freyfaxi's peculiar behaviour — yet when Hrafnkell is made aware of the fact that Freyfaxi has been ridden, Einarr makes no attempt to convey to Hrafnkell any of the details that the audience has just witnessed.<sup>610</sup> His acceptance of his death is perplexing because it seems that Freyfaxi made all the decisions for him and yet he does not attempt to give any excuse. This sense of confusion permeates Eyvindr's scene as well, although unlike the previous example, where Hrafnkell does not have all the information to hand, everyone involved (Hrafnkell, Eyvindr and the audience) ought to know what to expect, yet Eyvindr displays a frustrating level of wilful ignorance. Finally, we see Sámr's second plea for assistance from the Þjóstarssynir: the result of this short scene is that Sámr ends up in the same position that his uncle Þorbjörn would have been in had he not convinced Sámr to help him take Hrafnkell on. He is condemned because of his *gæfuleysi* ('lack of good fortune') and his decision to let Hrafnkell live is put down to a simple lack of wisdom (*vizkumunr*), but Sámr leaves the audience little to sympathise with, as he sullenly rejects the generous offers of gifts from the Þjóstarsynir in lieu of their martial support.<sup>611</sup>

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<sup>608</sup> Slater, 'From Rhetoric and Structure', pp. 36–7.

<sup>609</sup> Sayers, 'Ethics or pragmatics', pp. 397–8.

<sup>610</sup> ÍF 11, 105; or, at the very least, the narrative does not pause to give Einarr this chance. The effect is the same, in that the audience can imagine his explanation without getting the cathartic experience of seeing him put it forth in his defence.

<sup>611</sup> ÍF 11, 133.

In the first instance, Hrafnkell and his actions appear less sympathetic to the audience because we know that Einarr only rode Freyfaxi out of desperation; at the Alþingi Hrafnkell's lax attitude makes him seem deserving of his punishment; later, Eyvindr's stubbornness detracts from our sympathy for him; and finally, Sámr is condemned for his actions and condemns himself in the audience's eyes by refusing to accept charity as his uncle did earlier in the saga. These moments all entail a change to the saga's narrative perspective, something that is not unique to *Hrafnkels saga*, although it is more common for this technique to engender sympathy for both sides of a saga conflict than to problematize audience perceptions in this way. In other words, the net effect in *Hrafnkels saga* is for us to see the negative aspects of all characters,<sup>612</sup> rather than the more positive, humanising effect generated by key switches in point-of-view in, for instance, *Heiðarvíga saga* and *Njáls saga*.<sup>613</sup> The purpose of this is something that I will return to in the conclusion of this chapter, following a consideration of scenes that show the characters struggle to bring about peaceful settlements in 5.ii.

#### 5.ii: Mercy and mitigating trouble

If Hrafnkell's offer to Þorbjörn only compounds the trouble he has made for himself, we should recall that an *ójafnaðarmaðr* is a person who does not participate in the balanced-exchange model of societal reciprocity. Hrafnkell remains this type of character even having offered Þorbjörn a change of situation following the death of his son Einarr, because he misjudges the deal: what Hrafnkell offers is 'a gift so valuable that it could not be repaid'.<sup>614</sup> Yet by making this offer, Hrafnkell finds himself inextricably drawn into a tit-for-tat series of events that he had previously managed to avoid by the use of force or the refusal to offer settlements. He has broken his tradition of ignoring

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<sup>612</sup> O'Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, p. 39.

<sup>613</sup> Martínez Pizarro, 'Three Meals', p. 231; Lönnroth, 'Rhetorical Persuasion', pp. 178–9. If sympathy is engendered by seeing a character at a domestic meal, as these articles argue, then perhaps our sympathy should be with Hrafnkell following Einarr's ride, as Freyfaxi calls him away from his table: ÍF 11, 104.

<sup>614</sup> Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, p. 242. Hrafnkell's offer is not defined by the saga itself as a *gjof*, nor as compensation; indeed, Hrafnkell is very careful not to give a name to what he offers, beyond its monetary implications (*góða kosti; vel dýrr*). I do not take issue with Miller's implication, however: that Þorbjörn's pride is stung by an offer that is coded more as charity than as legal recompense. Compensation from an equal is both a sign of respect for a rival, as well as a gesture that asks for respectful adherence to the settlement; Hrafnkell's offer asks for nothing in return but Þorbjörn's continued subservience.

problems or simply solving them by violent individualism and now Hrafnkell has found himself in a situation that he can no longer control, because Sámr and his backers, Þorgeirr and Þorkell, have a say in what is to happen in the newly expanded cast of the saga.

When pinpointing the moment at which the saga's sleepy introductory equilibrium is disrupted, we might as well be asking: when do events become so inexorable that the plot is inevitable?<sup>615</sup> This question may have a number of possible answers, and refers back to the problem of establishing absolute beginnings in saga narrative.<sup>616</sup> We might lay the blame on Hrafnkell for making an oath to Freyr, on Þorbjörn for refusing compensation, on Sámr for taking on his uncle's case — or even on Einarr for riding the horse. Whilst the question of Sámr and Þorbjörn's role is pursued later in this section, it is logical to begin with Hrafnkell himself as the *ójafnaðarmaður* and thus the most likely disturber of the peace. In this section I examine two moments in the early part of the saga that have a bearing on the equilibrium of chapters one and two of the saga and on Hrafnkell's status therein: the oath and the offer of payment to Þorbjörn.

#### *5.ii.a: His own worst enemy?*

*Hrafnkels saga* has been described by Hermann Pálsson as a narrative from which the role of fate is entirely absent.<sup>617</sup> Others have focussed on the pragmatic motivations for the saga's action: whether Hrafnkell's oath is a comment on religion, a heroic speech act to be adhered to for honour's sake, an arrogant overstepping of social boundaries or whether it is a petty stipulation that causes an innocent man's death.<sup>618</sup> For my purposes, the social motivations are less important than the narrative ones, implicit in the observation that '[the oath] takes away the power of making case-by-case decisions'.<sup>619</sup> Hrafnkell's public oath ties him to a certain pattern of action, and that in itself is

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<sup>615</sup> Cf. Heinemann, '*Skömm er óhófs ævi*', in which he aims to identify general outcomes that are essential to the story (oath, transgression, punishment, etcetera).

<sup>616</sup> Hume, 'Beginnings and Endings', p. 593.

<sup>617</sup> Hermann Pálsson, *Art and Ethics*, pp. 43–4.

<sup>618</sup> Bonner and Grimstad, 'A Closer Look at Dialogues', pp. 12; 24 emphasises the oath as a speech act and as a 'personal rule' beyond social norms; Arnold, *Post-Classical Saga*, pp. 127–31 emphasises the religious and hierarchical implications of the oath.

<sup>619</sup> Bonner and Grimstad, 'A Closer Look at Dialogues', p. 20.

beholden to an 'irrational' element.<sup>620</sup> The oath itself is a human act with a public, social context,<sup>621</sup> but it places a degree of control into the hands of a pre-Christian deity, invoking the authority of Freyr in something as sensitive to human honour and pride as the possession of a fine horse. Just as Ármann Jakobsson has expressed ambivalence towards the importance of actual medieval belief when it comes to certain supernatural features of the sagas, in narrative terms we may be ambivalent about Freyr's presence in this saga.<sup>622</sup> Regardless of our belief in him, or even of Hrafnkell's, the oath itself is a device that draws on an intangible authority, which at once reinforces Hrafnkell's position of power whilst simultaneously undermining it.

Hrafnkell publicly proclaims Freyr's involvement in his business, perhaps in the expectation that the only people likely to contravene his injunction are his political rivals and would-be equals.<sup>623</sup> Óláfr pái performs a similarly public act when he predicts ill of Geirmundr and warns Bolli against marrying Guðrún (4.i.b). Miller has observed that 'prophecies, like dreams, might be used to attribute responsibility, or, indeed, to avoid it altogether',<sup>624</sup> and it is not difficult to see how Hrafnkell's oath falls into a similar category. The oath was meant to absolve Hrafnkell of responsibility for any necessary action and to ensure that wrongdoing was attributed to the person who broke the oath. Yet whilst the lack of control that Óláfr proclaims to have in *Laxdæla saga* pertains to the lives of his son and foster-son rather than to his own life, Hrafnkell's oath is an obligation placed on himself, and becomes more of an act of self-sabotage than the example of Óláfr.

Hrafnkell is thus his own worst enemy in his role as both *ójafnaðarmaðr* and protagonist. The swearing of the oath leads into our first encounter with Þorbjörn and Einarr and thus into the main action of the saga, and shortly afterwards there is another crucial moment which contrasts with the state of affairs as described in the opening chapters. If Hrafnkell's participation in single combat and his refusal to pay compensation are a part of the saga's established equilibrium then that apparently stable, peaceful state is further altered when Hrafnkell tries to compensate Þorbjörn for Einarr's death. In doing so, he makes it known to Þorbjörn that he considers the killing of Einarr to be worse than other killings he has committed. He does not have conviction in his oath (which he explicitly uses as justification for killing Einarr), so for the first time, having defended his own

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<sup>620</sup> Miller, 'Dreams, prophecy and sorcery', p. 103.

<sup>621</sup> Even if one views the nature of the religion as private, the oath has public ramifications: cf. Scovazzi, *La Saga di Hrafnkell*, pp. 15–20.

<sup>622</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, 'Beast and Man', p. 140.

<sup>623</sup> Bonner and Grimstad, 'A Closer Look at Dialogues', p. 24.

<sup>624</sup> Miller, 'Dreams, prophecy and sorcery', p. 106.



interests, Hrafnkell makes a concession: ‘mun ek þat nú sýna, at mér þykkir þetta verk mitt verra en qnnur þau, er ek hefi unnit’.<sup>625</sup>

According to his description, we might postulate that previous conflicts involving Hrafnkell followed a pattern similar to the following: Hrafnkell becomes involved in a dispute; he kills someone (perhaps in a duel); he defends his position with threats and violence; he refuses to pay compensation for his deeds; and proceedings come to a halt. His enemies cannot maintain their demands for recompense and Hrafnkell is left unchallenged. Yet in this case, Hrafnkell has made a public oath, and he is forced to kill in order to defend it and his word.

Þorbjörn, who approached Hrafnkell himself and elicited an admission of regret from him, seems to think that he has the chieftain on the back foot. Although without Þorbjörn’s request it seems unlikely that Hrafnkell would have offered any sort of deal at all, Þorbjörn’s journey is nevertheless not one that he — or the audience — can expect to be successful. Hrafnkell’s offer is a surprise to an audience who has been told that he never offers compensation; it seems surprising to Hrafnkell himself as he makes it! Yet Þorbjörn does not miss a beat, and decides that this unexpected concession offers an opportunity: then he presses his case too hard and reveals that he expects compensation from Hrafnkell as his equal. Hrafnkell focuses on the monetary aspect (‘þat mæli fleiri, at [sá] maðr sé vel dýrr’)<sup>626</sup> when he offers security to Þorbjörn and his family, and this monetary aspect is seated within the public view: people will see what a generous man Hrafnkell is, and remember how he is ‘linr ok blíðr’ (‘agreeable and pleasant’) with the men of Hrafnkelsdalur. But Þorbjörn rejects this managed outcome and decides that if things come into the public sphere then he would rather be seen as someone who stands up for his rights than as a grateful recipient of charity.

When Hrafnkell dismisses Þorbjörn’s request for arbitration with the words ‘þá þykkisk þú jafnmennt mér’ he reminds us of his status as *ójafnaðarmaðr*: inequitable and unequal to others.<sup>627</sup> Hrafnkell’s offer displays his reluctance to become involved in the socially accepted process of arbitration and settlement. He wishes to maintain full jurisdiction over the situation, remaining the *ójafnaðarmaðr* who does not truly participate in balanced-exchange dealings. Nevertheless, we are

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<sup>625</sup> ÍF 11, 105–6: ‘I must reveal that this deed seems to me worse than others that I have committed’.

<sup>626</sup> ÍF 11, 106: ‘many people will say that this man is worth a lot’.

<sup>627</sup> ÍF 11, 106: ‘then you must think yourself of equal standing to me’. Bjarni, Þorbjörn’s brother, repeats this attempt to put the old man in his correct place, telling him ‘Bjarni kvað eigi sitt jafnmenni við at eiga, þar er Hrafnkell er’, (*Ibid.*: ‘Bjarni said that he would not be dealing with a man of equal standing when it came to Hrafnkell’). Unlike Ormr in *Þórðar saga hreðu* it is not clear that Hrafnkell is unjustified in thinking himself above his neighbours (see above, 2.ii.c, p. 56); cf. Andersson, ‘Ethics and Politics’.

to assume that it was more of an offer than he had ever made before, and the fact that it is made, along with expressions of regret, seemingly gives Þorbjörn confidence in his decision to press the case.

Paradoxically then, Hrafnkell's attempt to mitigate the trouble that he has caused for himself backfires and propels the case forward. Hrafnkell may try to return to his previous state, where he ignored the kin of his victims because of his self-righteous belief in his actions, but the offer has been made and Þorbjörn reminded of how important the speech of many (*mæli fleiri*) can be to his case.

#### *5.ii.b: The road to defeat is paved with good intentions*

Just as Hrafnkell misguidedly tries to mitigate the formation of trouble by offering Þorbjörn a deal, so Sámr offers Hrafnkell a choice as a part of his attempt to bring an end to their dispute: be killed or live on in shame and poverty. Hrafnkell grasps the opportunity to live, citing his sons as his main reason for doing so.<sup>628</sup> Sámr must either think that the family will be so grateful for Hrafnkell's life that the reciprocal cycle of vengeance is at a close, or that he is now in such a lofty position of power that Hrafnkell will not be able to make any return attack.

So far my discussion of *ójafnaðarmenn* in the sagas has focussed primarily on the beginnings of saga plots, but Hrafnkell's situation has the potential to return us to the question of how they end (cf. 3.ii.d). Ending conflict is tricky: as Miller implied, a lasting settlement relies upon a decisive balance of honour in favour of the victors.<sup>629</sup> In the opening act of the saga Hrafnkell evidently thought that the natural order of society and his reputation as an *ójafnaðarmaðr* together ensured his security and authority when he made his offer to Þorbjörn. But Sámr later appears to think that his dominance is also assured when he allows Hrafnkell to be spared. Both men misjudge the situation to their detriment, although ostensibly both actions are motivated by mercy and good intentions.

At the court of confiscation, Sámr has the opportunity to punish an *ójafnaðarmaðr* according to the conventions of the sagas. Hrafnkell cannot be expected to retaliate or return any social gesture in an appropriate fashion, and the common response to someone like this, who refuses to play by normal social rules, is to remove them from society. Sámr instead feels secure in

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<sup>628</sup> ÍF 11, 121.

<sup>629</sup> Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, p. 302.

predicting a future in which Hrafnkell lives but never causes him trouble again; a future we are expected to be sceptical of given the warnings of the Þjóstarssynir.<sup>630</sup>

The sparing of Hrafnkell is a crux in the audience's interpretation of these characters, as is the slaying of Eyvindr.<sup>631</sup> Sámur's actions appear well-intentioned but they are evidently foolhardy; they come hot on the heels of his pre-emptive celebration of victory at the Alþingi.<sup>632</sup> Making a decision like Sámur does when he spares Hrafnkell — and getting it wrong — speaks of a misplaced sort of pride. In this it resembles Hrafnkell's misjudgement of the determination and persuasiveness that Þorbjörn and Sámur are capable of.

Perhaps most importantly, Sámur's decision demonstrates the fact that he considers Hrafnkell's goods and wounded pride to be equivalent to his cousin Einarr's life. The fact that Sámur settles for what is essentially an extreme version of the original offer to Þorbjörn gives us (and no doubt Hrafnkell also) the impression that the motivation has always been monetary, and not primarily about Þorbjörn's social standing, 'self-esteem' or 'guilt' on behalf of Einarr.<sup>633</sup> Hrafnkell's death may not be worth much in monetary value, but it would surely answer as recompense for Þorbjörn's injured sense of self-worth.

Shortly after Sámur has driven Hrafnkell from Aðalból, we learn that Hrafnkell's pride (*ofsi*) diminished: 'á þetta lögðu menn mikla umræðu, hversu hans ofsi hafði niður fallit, ok minnisk nú margr á fornan orðskvið, at skömm er óhófs ævi.'<sup>634</sup> That this is framed as the opinion of the public at large is significant. Hrafnkell has been punished, although not as harshly as he might have been, and yet people accept this and deem him humbled. However, in vengeance killings, where one person's death is tallied against another's it implied that they were of similar worth.<sup>635</sup> Sámur's decision sends Hrafnkell a clear message that Einarr's death did not merit Hrafnkell's death, and such a message seems unlikely to diminish Hrafnkell's ego.

The question of the chieftain's 'altered' personality following his punishment has been one of the biggest bones of contention in interpretations of the saga. We are told: '[v]ar nú skipan á komin á land hans. Maðrinn var miklu vinsælli en áður. Hafði hann ina sömu skapsmuni um gagnsemð

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<sup>630</sup> ÍF 11, 121.

<sup>631</sup> Andersson, *Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, p. 180.

<sup>632</sup> Kratz, 'Thirteenth-Century Fiction?', pp. 426–7.

<sup>633</sup> Andersson, *Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, pp. 176–7.

<sup>634</sup> ÍF 11, 122: 'people had a lot to say about how his arrogance had fallen low, and many now remembered the old saying, that brief is the life of excess.'

<sup>635</sup> Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, p. 277.

ok risnu, en miklu var maðrinn nú vinsælli ok gæfari ok hægri en fyrr at qllu.<sup>636</sup> The question has been vexed by the fact that Jón Jóhannesson unnecessarily emended the manuscript reference to Hrafnkell's *land* into a reference to his disposition (*lund*), which I have corrected in the quotation given here.<sup>637</sup> The qualities that are alleged to have undergone a change are suspiciously external: popularity and a calm demeanour tell us little of the underlying psychology of a saga character.<sup>638</sup> Although it is *gæfr* not *gæfa* that is mentioned, the similarity between the two words must not have passed original audiences by. *Gæfa* remains an elusive manifestation of the public tolerance of a person's actions, combined with narrative signposting and the irrational associations with fate and luck, but it is as evocative of a person's success as their popularity.

Heinemann has objected 'how else does one judge a man's character except by observing his behaviour and temperaments?'<sup>639</sup> I feel this question misses the point, however: Hrafnkell's attitude towards costs and outgoings has not changed, but we are told that his popularity has; as the audience of the saga we do not get the opportunity to observe any changed behaviour in him if it is not related directly to us; we see only the change in the community's attitude to him. Whatever behaviour or temperament caused his increased popularity, we are not made privy to it. Qualities like popularity are as self-perpetuating as their opposites; Hrafnkell becomes more popular the more popular he becomes. After a time his behaviour seemingly has little to do with his popularity — something that might make us recall the implication that an *ójafnaðarmaðr* can preside over a 'balanced' pre-plot state (5.i.a).

At this stage in the saga we might view the death of Freyfaxi at the hands of Sámr and his allies as symbolic of Hrafnkell's old life: the horse that contributed to the initial trouble is now gone, and Hrafnkell becomes even more successful in his new existence.<sup>640</sup> He abandons the obligation he

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<sup>636</sup> ÍF 11, 125: 'there was now a change upon his land. The man was more popular than before. He had the same attitude regarding hospitality and generosity, but the man was now much more popular and quieter and more easy-going in everything than he was before.'

<sup>637</sup> ÍF 11, 125 n. 3; Jón's main text is the earliest surviving copy of the saga, AM 162 I fol (c. 1500); some seventeenth-century copies use *lund* rather than *land*: *ONP s.v. lund*.

<sup>638</sup> Cf. Snorri goði's introduction ('fann lítt á honum, hvárt honum þótti vel eða illa', ÍF 4, 26: 'he gave away little about whether he thought well of things or ill') and his journey to increased popularity ('en er Snorri tók at eldask, þá tóku at vaxa vinsældir hans', ÍF 4, 180: 'but when Snorri grew old, then his popularity began to increase').

<sup>639</sup> Heinemann, 'The Old Problem with the New Man', p. 449.

<sup>640</sup> Þorgeirr's words, '[e]n hestr þessi sýnisk mér eigi betri en aðrir hestar, heldr því verri, at margt illt hefir af honum hlotizk' could easily describe Hrafnkell himself, ÍF 11, 123: 'but this horse seems no better to me than other horses, indeed he is worse, because a great deal of ill has been caused by him'.

felt towards the gods, freeing himself to work only according to his own motivations.<sup>641</sup> The saga tells us not only how prosperous Hrafnkell now became, but how hard he worked and how, as well as noting that his pride had diminished, people were content to do his bidding on even the most trivial of subjects: ‘vildi svá hvern sitja ok standa sem hann vildi’.<sup>642</sup> The process of his punishment, inadequate as it might be for an *ójafnaðarmaður*, has seemingly been enough to convince the public within the saga (and some readers of it) of his reformed nature — or at least of the advantages of being allied to him.

Six years on, the swift response of the *griðkona* to Eyvindr Bjarnason’s return is enough to signal to Hrafnkell that he has public approval to take action. Notably, the saga’s only other named members of the community (besides the active characters) appear here, signalling the fact that Hrafnkell’s support now has more depth and substance than ever before.<sup>643</sup> The contrast with Sámur’s long journey — through an all but unpopulated landscape — to meet his allies is stark: ‘yfir brú ok þaðan yfir Möðrudalsheiði ok svá yfir Jökulsá uppi á fjalli, svá til Mývatns, þaðan yfir Fljótsheiði ok Ljósavatnsskarð ok létti eigi fyrri en hann kom vestr í Þorsafjörð.’<sup>644</sup> The make-up of the cast and character-system at this point in the saga has little resemblance to the united front that presented itself against Hrafnkell at the Alþingi.

Many decisive situations in the sagas involve the misjudging of a person’s social worth (4.iii.a). Hrafnkell sees in Eyvindr a man worthy enough for his death to compensate for Hrafnkell’s exile; Eyvindr fails to recognise his value to this man.<sup>645</sup> Thus Eyvindr contributes to his own death not by wearing fine clothes,<sup>646</sup> but by severely undervaluing himself. He consistently refuses to acknowledge that Hrafnkell might have an interest in killing him, and although this is a common trope that leads to the heroic death of the misinformed victim, it is particularly affecting here in the context of Hrafnkell’s desire to achieve payback.<sup>647</sup>

In another echo, the saga then presents its second ‘merciful victory’ in Hrafnkell’s final encounter with Sámur. The pride that can be inferred in Sámur’s earlier behaviour is noted by

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<sup>641</sup> ÍF 11, 124.

<sup>642</sup> ÍF 11, 124: ‘and each person was happy to sit or stand as Hrafnkell wished it’.

<sup>643</sup> ÍF 11, 127: the Hallsteinssynir and Hrólfssynir.

<sup>644</sup> ÍF 11, 132: ‘over the bridge, and from there over Möðrudalsheiði and thence over Jökulsá and up into the mountains, to Mývatn, then over Fljótsdalsheiði and Ljósavatnsskarð and he did not let himself stop until he came west into Þorsafjörður.’

<sup>645</sup> Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, pp. 200–1.

<sup>646</sup> Cf. Heinemann’s output on *Hrafnkels saga*.

<sup>647</sup> Cf. *Heiðarvíg saga*; ÍF 3, 228–9.

Hrafnkell, who tells him: ‘þú gerðir mik sveitarrækan, en ek læt mér líka, at þú sitir á Leikskálum, ok mun þat duga, ef þú ofsar þér eigi til vansa’.<sup>648</sup> This is very unlike the public perception of Hrafnkell’s *ofsi*; as something that simply evaporated with his expulsion from Aðalból. Hrafnkell uses the verb *að ofsa* rather than the noun *ofsi*, implying that it is something that Sámur should be able to control and diminish at will. The distinction is especially significant given that the verb is considerably less common than the noun *ofsi*.<sup>649</sup>

To compound this assessment of Sámur’s failings, the þjóstarssynir point to his *gæfuleysi*. In the — not dissimilar — events of *Þorsteins þáttr stangarhöggs*, the *ógæfa* that Þorsteinn foresees for himself is the ‘bad luck’ that he will be subject to should he use all of his strength to kill Bjarni Brodd-Helgason.<sup>650</sup> If Þorsteinn kills Bjarni, he shows the full extent of his reach, and shows himself a threat to other powerful men (who, incidentally, can now prepare to deal with such a formidable opponent).<sup>651</sup> Although Þorsteinn, like Sámur, spares his powerful opponent, he does so only once he has proven his quality, and he subsequently allows Bjarni to settle the terms of peace himself. Sámur does neither before sparing Hrafnkell, showing the extent of his ambition, but also its limits.

Society in *Hrafnkels saga* and its picture of the balanced-exchange model of behaviour might be likened to a game in which *ójafnaðarmenn* do not abide by the rules. Yet by the end of the saga, Hrafnkell has learnt how to make the rules work for him in order to play to win.<sup>652</sup> He has gained qualities far more useful to a leader than the staunch individualism that defines the *ójafnaðarmaðr*,<sup>653</sup> even though we ostensibly only see these qualities put to use in his own interests. This is not to say that he is a reformed man: he has learnt to manipulate reciprocal dealings to his profit, but his idea of a balanced outcome is still not an equal one.<sup>654</sup>

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<sup>648</sup> ÍF 11, 131: ‘you have acted shamefully towards me, but I can live with you staying put at Leikskálar, and it will suffice providing that you do not let your arrogance bring you into disgrace’.

<sup>649</sup> *ONP*, s.v. *ofsa*; *ofsi*. *Ofsa* has seven entries; *ofsi* has eighty-two.

<sup>650</sup> ÍF 11, 76–7; Miller, *Bloodtaking and Peacemaking*, p. 73.

<sup>651</sup> Johansen, ‘The Hero of *Hrafnkels saga*’, pp. 278–9.

<sup>652</sup> It cannot really be said that Hrafnkell’s settlement offer to Sámur counts as ‘abiding by society’s rules’ when it is such an unbalanced settlement. I am grateful to John McKinnell for a conversation on this topic in Oxford, following my presentation Shortt Butler, ‘Making Trouble and Mitigating Trouble’.

<sup>653</sup> Meulengracht Sørensen, *Fortælling og ære*, p. 197.

<sup>654</sup> A similar manifestation of the *ójafnaðarmaðr*’s domination of court settlements can be found in *Bjarnar saga Hitdælakappa*, where Þorsteinn Kuggason peacefully obtains a decisive — and very one-sided — settlement for the death of Björn (ÍF 3, 211).

### 5.iii: Social, familial and irrational obligations

Obligations of one sort or another underpin many crucial moments in *Hrafnkels saga*. There is commonality between the assignation of authority to an irrational force and the relationship between an individual and public opinion. As the Þjóstarssynir recognise, a chieftain is only secure when he behaves correctly towards his *þingmenn*,<sup>655</sup> but public opinion is often a nebulous force, and it benefits Sámur only passively: people are happy with him, but there is no up-swell of discontent at either his downfall or Hrafnkell's earlier in the saga. A chieftain's necessary responsibility towards his people is set against the demands made upon the individual by family, deepening the theme of obligation in the saga.

On two occasions the obligation to support family members is invoked to persuade a reluctant person to become involved in the case against Hrafnkell. First Þorbjörn's complaints include the words: '[h]ygg ek, at engi maðr muni eiga jafnmikil auvirði at frændum sem ek',<sup>656</sup> from which Sámur's help grudgingly follows with the admission '[m]eir geri ek þat fyrir frændsemi sakar við þik'.<sup>657</sup> Similarly, Þorgeirr goði Þjóstarsson's help is only elicited by recourse to his brotherly sensibilities, where Þorkell makes pointed use of the words 'alla oss bræðr' ('all/both of us brothers') and *frændi* in his final effort to gain Þorgeirr's support.<sup>658</sup> In both cases it is this blood connection that inextricably binds people to the case against Hrafnkell; there is a finality to agreements made when kinship is invoked and it is clear that forcing the support of others in this manner does little to guarantee lasting settlements.

Once involved, Sámur takes over the handling of events from Þorbjörn just as Þorgeirr then takes over matters from Þorkell. The narrator, however, is not concerned with telling the audience whether Þorbjörn is ultimately happy with the fact that Hrafnkell has been defeated on equal terms; whether he (and his 'ómegð mikla' ['many dependents'])<sup>659</sup> benefitted from the wealth confiscated from Hrafnkell,<sup>660</sup> or whether Þorbjörn even lives to see or be affected by Sámur's downfall. Equally, we are not informed of the extent to which Þorkell enjoys the fruits of their combined victory as he expected to. These instances of obligation towards pushy family members are not, therefore,

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<sup>655</sup> ÍF 11, 123.

<sup>656</sup> ÍF 11, 107: 'I reckon that no man can have such wretched kinsmen as I do'.

<sup>657</sup> ÍF 11, 108: 'I will do that for the sake of our kinship.'

<sup>658</sup> ÍF 11, 115; Bolton, 'The Heart of *Hrafnkatla*', p. 44.

<sup>659</sup> ÍF 11, 100.

<sup>660</sup> Sámur gives his uncle the farm at Leikskálar, but there is no mention of *fé* ('money/moveable wealth') as part of this gift: ÍF 11, 100; 124.

portrayed as an affirmation of the value of a broad, supportive kin group, rather they problematize the social expectations invoked. Part of the reason that Þorbjörn and Þorkell's motivations have been left open to so much criticism and debate is because the saga never confirms the impact of their determination to bring Hrafnkell to justice.<sup>661</sup>

The saga's character-sphere is built up through kinship and obligation, as is the case with much of the genre: the introduction of one person leads to the introduction of their relatives. Yet in these instances *Hrafnkels saga* does not keep hold of each individual, rather it resembles a relay, with one person passing on responsibility to the next; a fact that is particularly noticeable because of its small cast of characters and the short period of time in which the events of its plot are set. Hrafnkell is the only character whose relationships extend beyond both the saga's beginning and its end, presenting a defiant longevity against the reluctant alliance that forms against him.

The most striking evidence of this is in the narrative treatment of Þorbjörn. Both he and Hrafnkell are obligated to their dependents, and their different decisions have equally significant consequences. Hrafnkell begs for the lives of his men when Sámr captures him, and in choosing life he saves them in addition to himself. Most importantly, however, he makes the decision for his sons.<sup>662</sup> Þorbjörn, conversely, assigns such weight to the death of one of his sons that he turns down an offer that would guarantee his other children a stable upbringing.<sup>663</sup> Although they are an integral part of his introduction, Þorbjörn's poor dependents are last mentioned by Hrafnkell himself in his offer to take care of them and find them good matches: '[s]onu þína ok dætr skulum vit í brott leysa með minni forsjó ok efla þau svá'.<sup>664</sup> After this the saga makes no further mention of them and whilst they slip from relevance the further the case travels from Þorbjörn's own hands, the final lines of the saga itself are dedicated to Hrafnkell's sons.

In other contexts in the sagas, it is shown to be acceptable for an old man to forgo compensation when he has lost his sons, especially if it will ensure a settlement to benefit wider society.<sup>665</sup> Conventional notions of heroism dictate that Hrafnkell should be willing to die for honour, however, leaving any vengeance to his sons. Perhaps the difference in age between Hrafnkell and Þorbjörn ought to see a reversal in their decisions: '[i]f it was proper for old men to have their grief

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<sup>661</sup> See above, nn. 576–81.

<sup>662</sup> Sámr references 'ómegð' ('dependents') but Hrafnkell specifies 'geri ek þat mest sökum sona minna', ÍF 11, 121: 'I do this mostly for the sake of my sons'.

<sup>663</sup> ÍF 11, 106.

<sup>664</sup> ÍF 11, 106: 'we will find good matches for your sons and daughters with my provision and they will flourish from this'.

<sup>665</sup> 4.i.b, p. 129.



mixed with frustration and despair, the grief of younger men was supposed to produce anger and, depending on what the precise source of the grief was, shame, spite, vengefulness, and a most punctilious sense of duty.<sup>666</sup> Hrafnkell spares his sons from this obligation towards him and this results in the absurdly one-sided settlement at the saga's close: it is Hrafnkell alone against an ever-widening sphere of kin and political allies. Yet the main beneficiaries of this scenario are Hrafnkell's sons, not himself.<sup>667</sup>

Þorbjörn's own stubbornness regarding compensation for Einarr must be seen from his point of view as the necessary fulfilment of a paternal obligation: it was his fault that Einarr was in a position to be killed by Hrafnkell for seemingly just doing his job. But as the quotation above implies, Þorbjörn takes on a misguided obligation in the name of this relationship. We might view his wheedling abuse of Sámr in support of his case as an example in which he comes closer to the *griðkona* later in the narrative than to other bereaved fathers in the *Íslendingasögur*. As Clover has pointed out, there are many other scenes in the sagas that depict old or decrepit men as occupants of the traditional female position in society: passive or at best reactive only, and disenfranchised by a system of self-assertion based upon skill at arms.<sup>668</sup>

At 4.iii.a I associated Guðrún's dreams with an attempt to assert some form of control over her life — in contrast to the way men in *Laxdæla saga* used 'irrational' motivators such as fate, dreams or curses to excuse themselves of control over events. Þorbjörn has no such recourse in *Hrafnkels saga*, but he can be said to take advantage of Hrafnkell's position: having created a new, irrational obligation to a supernatural being, Hrafnkell regrets his lack of control over the situation he finds himself in. He admits this to Þorbjörn, and the old man snatches the opportunity to take advantage of the chieftain's uncharacteristic uncertainty; heedless of the cost to his own dependents.

The illusion of equal footing between a poor old man and a chieftain does not endure. Þorbjörn gradually loses his influence over events; Hrafnkell, meanwhile, decries his relationship with the supernatural as vanity, or mere posturing (*hégómi*).<sup>669</sup> In doing so, Hrafnkell reclaims full

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<sup>666</sup> Miller, 'Emotions and the Sagas', p. 103.

<sup>667</sup> ÍF 11, 133.

<sup>668</sup> Clover, 'Regardless of Sex'.

<sup>669</sup> ÍF 11, 124; Cleasby-Vigfússon, s.v. *hégómi*. I am reluctant to assign too much significance to this as an indicator of his changed personality; the fact that greed and pride are present in characters other than the ostentatiously-practicing pagan chieftain dilute the connection between religion and personality (a connection that the sagas are not usually reluctant to make explicit).

authority over his actions and obligations;<sup>670</sup> if placing some of his authority in Freyr's hands was a posture designed to indicate his formidable status to society at large, then he now aims to manipulate the public evaluation of his power entirely on his own terms. He is apparently successful: accepting mercy for the sake of his sons makes him seem humble, less a man of *ofsi*, and working his new farmland himself shows his dedication and his success at getting the most from his resources. When the *griðkona* implies that he would be acting against public opinion by allowing Eyvindr to pass through his land unmolested then he knows that he has regained the sympathetic support of enough people to obtain vengeance and dictate a settlement entirely on his own terms — as he was previously accustomed to doing.

#### 5.iv: Moral and political messages

Like Snorri goði, Hrafnkell learns to control public opinion by seeming to ignore it (3.i.b). It does not need to be reiterated that any political reading of *Hrafnkels saga* is necessarily a bleak one for a modern audience.<sup>671</sup> The people of the district seem to willingly put themselves back under the control of a man whose radical personality change is far from certain; in the most optimistic reading of the saga's politics we must grit our teeth and accept its portrayal of a medieval concept of legitimacy and the right to rule.<sup>672</sup> For the moral or ethical interpretation of the saga to avoid a negative conclusion, it has always been maintained that Hrafnkell's personality must undergo a change (preferably preceding the murder of Eyvindr, to whom some deficiency must be attached in order to focus blame upon the victim).<sup>673</sup>

There is much that *Hrafnkels saga* leaves unsaid; as ever, when it is claimed by some that there is a deliberate, underlying message to this story, others will ask why the narrator chose to hide his message so well.<sup>674</sup> In addition to this ambiguity, there is clearly both the will and the evidence

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<sup>670</sup> Cf. Fulk, 'The Moral System', esp. pp. 6–7.

<sup>671</sup> See Johansen, 'The Hero of *Hrafnkels saga*', p. 266.

<sup>672</sup> Andersson, 'Ethics and Politics'.

<sup>673</sup> Andersson, *Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, pp. 181–2.

<sup>674</sup> I have not discussed Christian parallels in detail here, because as individual echoes (Freyfaxi as equivalent to the Tree of Knowledge, for instance) I do not think they are incompatible with the idea that the saga presents itself as a palimpsest of possible interpretations. However, as an overarching 'message' I cannot help but think it must have been garbled into obscurity by the saga's composer if, indeed, a Christian moral message was ever intended as the only way of interpreting the narrative. I believe that my discussion of *gæfa* and reference

for modern audiences to see two sides in virtually every scene and character. That the saga describes its central characters as an *ójafnaðarmaðr* and *uppivözlumaðr* does not make the task of identifying who to sympathise with any easier. Indeed, that there should simply be one theme or moral to convey has only vaguely been called into doubt by scholars in instances such as this, by Heinemann (in a footnote): '[n]o doubt in the past all commentators have made the mistake, to some degree or another, of assuming that *Hrafnkels saga* has a meaning and of attempting to explain the saga in light of this assumed meaning.'<sup>675</sup>

Although Andersson divided previous readings of the saga as I have done here — as broadly moral or political — he attempts to unite the two in his explanation of *Hrafnkels saga* as the disillusioned sigh of an age in which the reliability of chieftains was constantly called into question.<sup>676</sup> Evidently this kind of cynical interpretation has troubled scholars such as Heinemann and Johansen in previous studies, however;<sup>677</sup> there remains a desire to locate a more positive aspect within the saga's ending, and why should we assume that this desire is confined only to modern audiences?

Amongst other strong contenders, the most divisive encounters in the saga might be listed as: Hrafnkell's offer and Þorbjörn's refusal of it; the torture of Hrafnkell's men and Sámr's mercy towards Hrafnkell; Eyvindr's refusal to run and Hrafnkell's killing of Eyvindr. All three are united by a misguided belief in the returns due to good intentions, from Hrafnkell's certainty that Þorbjörn will accept his offer, to Sámr's notion that his mercy will put an end to any rivalry between himself and Hrafnkell, to Eyvindr's insistence that he has done Hrafnkell no wrong and so deserves no wrong from him. All three assumptions are proved utterly false and actions that we would consider to be morally agreeable result in the most exaggerated kinds of punishment: torture and exile, humiliation and even death. That the dilemma posed by interpreting these scenes need not be considered a modern concern only is reinforced by Hermann Pálsson's contradictory references to John of Salisbury and Hugh of St Victor: the former would condemn Sámr for allowing a tyrant to live, whilst the latter might emphasise mercy above all else.<sup>678</sup>

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to Gunnar Karlsson's article above (4.ii, p. 136) indicate my opinions on the secular use and meaning of the word. Additionally, I do not argue against the idea that a medieval audience would see Hrafnkell's renunciation of Freyr as a good thing; rather I object to the ensuing implication that as a man who has improved his faith, Hrafnkell's killing of Eyvindr need not be seen in a negative light.

<sup>675</sup> Heinemann, '*Skömm er óhófs ævi*', p. 82 n. 4.

<sup>676</sup> Andersson, *Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, pp. 181 n. 1; 182.

<sup>677</sup> Heinemann, '*Skömm er óhófs ævi*'; Johansen, 'The Hero of *Hrafnkels saga*'.

<sup>678</sup> Hermann Pálsson, *Art and Ethics*, 44; 53–6.

Just as audiences still strive to answer the unanswerable question posed by Guðrún's riddle at the end of *Laxdæla saga*,<sup>679</sup> so the scholarship of the '*Hrafnkels saga* industry' has proven that this narrative is no less effective at stirring up debate.<sup>680</sup> This kind of debate necessarily seems to call into doubt the trust we place in the saga narrator: even in *Laxdæla saga*, when we do as bidden and wonder who Guðrún loved most, we must assess the saga's record of events and scrutinise each interaction and detail of characterisation in order to reach an answer. Given that multiple answers continue to be put forward, we must suppose that there is something inherently misleading in the question: either it is wrong to imagine that there is one answer to Guðrún's riddle, or the narrator did not do a good job of indicating what the answer was. Surely when we wish to talk of the sophistication of the medieval Icelandic saga we would rather the case was the former.

*Hrafnkels saga* offers no such convenient riddle or question. The closest it comes is Þorgeirr's speech to Sámr at the close of the story, but this presents a cold assessment of events rather than an open-ended invitation to put forward an opinion. This makes it (ironically) less satisfying for an audience with its own preconceptions regarding the behaviour of the saga's characters. Indeed, the fact that, in typical 'objective' saga style, both main characters are introduced with such problematic personalities can only encourage our distrust of this narrator, for not presenting us with the type of saga opening that we are more commonly used to.<sup>681</sup> Much of the problem that people have with Hrafnkell as the justified victor emerges from the fact that he is an *ójafnaðarmaður*; a fact recognised by Heinemann in his most recent effort to demonstrate the character's altered personality.<sup>682</sup> Whereas Sámr seems to grow into the description *uppvíqzlumaður*, Hrafnkell's survival and unassailable victory sets him apart from all other examples of *ójafnaðarmenn* in the sagas. Thus our trust in the saga narrator is shaken from the characters' first introductions: if the fact that he is *ójafnaður* is not meant to be seen as a significant part of Hrafnkell's personality then why does the saga mention it — in accordance with the narrative tradition we have seen maintained across such a wide variety of sagas, no less?

It is tempting to view this in the context of Ranković's work on formulae; that is as a deliberate problematizing of the established tropes connected with the *ójafnaðarmaður*.<sup>683</sup> This fits with Andersson's reading of the late-thirteenth-century disillusionment with the chieftain class, but I think it can be seen as indicative of a deeper malaise regarding the society depicted in the sagas.

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<sup>679</sup> Cf. Ármann Jakobsson, *Nine Saga Studies*, p. 13.

<sup>680</sup> Foote, '*Skömm er óhófs ævi*', p. 139.

<sup>681</sup> See, once more, Kratz, 'Thirteenth-Century Fiction?', pp. 443–4, as quoted above.

<sup>682</sup> Heinemann, '*Skömm er óhófs ævi*', esp. p. 99.

<sup>683</sup> Ranković, 'Tinkering with Formulas'.

That three such significant scenes focus on the regrettable consequences that come of well-intentioned gestures (indeed we might add Einarr's encounter with Freyfaxi to this list) allows for an interpretation of the saga that reaches beyond the concerns of chieftains alone. The very idea of peaceful settlement in a reciprocal society is made unsustainable: obligations to higher powers and ambitious relatives conspire against ostensibly good, moral intentions. The *ójafnaðarmaðr* who began the narrative with a generous offer that could never be repaid ultimately triumphs by imposing a settlement calculated to crush his enemy's ability to retaliate. His intentions have become more selfish (or are at least confined to his close family) by the close of the saga and yet Hrafnkell's position has only become more secure.

## 6: ACTIONS AND REACTIONS, OPENINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

An elegant example of the important narrative function played by *ójafnaðr* is King Haraldr hárfagri's association with the quality. In *Egils saga* Haraldr's campaign to subjugate Norway is described as 'þessum ofsa ok ójafnaði';<sup>684</sup> *Harðar saga* terms it 'ágang ok ójafnað';<sup>685</sup> and for *Finnboga saga* it is 'ójafnað ok endemi'.<sup>686</sup> In the latter two examples this description of Haraldr is within the opening lines of the saga, establishing the setting for all that follows. Haraldr's *ójafnaðr*, like that of the other characters studied in this thesis, is essential to the forward motion of the plot. It justifies the decisions of those who leave Norway and it sets up the society of the Icelanders as one that is implicitly against the sort of domination that Haraldr represents. Despite the social undesirability of the quality, it brings only narrative rewards: Haraldr and his oppression provide the impetus to move to new lands.

It is likely that the values threatened by *ójafnaðarmenn* in the *Íslendingasögur* had more to do with the values of thirteenth-century Icelanders than those of the settlement generation.<sup>687</sup> Haraldr's neatly narrated take-over of the entirety of Norway is part of the foundation myth cultivated by medieval Icelanders.<sup>688</sup> It is therefore entirely appropriate that Haraldr is in some accounts associated with a character type that, as I have demonstrated, performs such a specific narrative function in the *Íslendingasögur*.

The use of the *ójafnaðarmaðr* fits with Tzvetan Todorov's template for the duality of narrative, in which he separates out the two stories inherent in the relating of a crime.<sup>689</sup> There is one story that ends with a crime, but there is another story, the investigation, that begins only after the crime; the events of the two stories do not share any points of action. As Todorov puts it, 'the story of the crime—tells "what really happened," whereas [...] the story of the investigation—explains "how the reader (or the narrator) has come to know about it."' <sup>690</sup> The investigation tells of consequences, although these consequences may be linked to the original crime both directly and indirectly. Similarly, Haraldr hárfagri's crimes and the fact that he has behaved with *ójafnaðr* are

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<sup>684</sup> ÍF 2, 8: 'these acts of arrogance and inequity'.

<sup>685</sup> ÍF 13, 3: 'aggression and inequity'.

<sup>686</sup> ÍF 14, 253: 'inequity and sheer cheek'.

<sup>687</sup> von See, *Altnordische Rechtswörter*, pp. 247–8.

<sup>688</sup> Sverrir Jakobsson, 'Erindringen om en mægtig personlighed'.

<sup>689</sup> Todorov, *Poetics of Prose*, pp. 45–6.

<sup>690</sup> Todorov, *Poetics of Prose*, p. 46.

stories that end before the beginning of *Finnboga saga* and *Harðar saga*, yet without them there would be no tale to tell afterwards regarding Icelandic settlers.

In Todorov's template these two stories become plot when they are told in conjunction with each other: '[i]n the story, there is no inversion in time, actions follow their natural order; in the plot, the author can present results before their causes, the end before the beginning.'<sup>691</sup> Haraldr functions as an introduction to the setting of the sagas themselves by helping to define Icelandic society by what it is not, but we may also think of the proleptic nature of character introductions in the context of Todorov's words. The creation of plot in the sagas is made possible by the way in which terms descriptive of personality anticipate the future actions of characters. A quality is introduced that does not fit with the nature of the sagas' narrative equilibrium and it guides the audience to an interpretation of that individual's position in the overarching plot.<sup>692</sup> For instance, the introductions of most *ójafnaðarmenn* rest upon an uneven chronology: the *ójafnaðarmenn* are described as such because of something they are yet to do, but we know to expect no good from them; shortly afterwards they kill, steal, seduce or offend in some such manner and other, decent members of society act to punish them for their deeds.<sup>693</sup>

I opened this thesis with the claim that 'villains act but heroes react'. This is one of the expectations that we as an audience bring to the sagas, as well as to other forms of narrative; when characters are introduced in a particular manner we are able to identify likely candidates for the role of 'villain' or 'antagonist'. As Part I showed, we are justified in our expectations when it comes to most instances in which a character is introduced as an *ójafnaðarmaðr*: the commonest course of events following this kind of introduction is that the character will act in an inexcusable manner and be punished for it. This type of character can, and often does, function as a narrative tool, forcing a response from others too honourable to trigger story-worthy events themselves. Yet there were also instances examined in Chapter 3 where the connection between a character introduction and the qualities that hint at events to come is altered and the existence of the quality itself is enough for the hero to act (*Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfjfls*; *Bárðar saga*; *Vatnsdæla saga*, to an extent). In these examples the introduction of these characters no longer anticipates plot in the same way: the

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<sup>691</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>692</sup> Thus the plot itself may not 'deliver praise and blame' for the characters, but event, plot and character remain inextricably linked, as introductions to characters frame and anticipate the events to come: cf. O'Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, p. 42.

<sup>693</sup> Cf. The question of whether this is a quality earned through deeds, or simply an innate aspect of personality, 2.iii, p. 66.

*ójafnaðarmenn* are bad, so the hero kills them. Ultimately they function as little more than an aspect of the hero's characterisation, which relies far more upon action than interaction in these sagas.

Across the case-studies of Part II the picture was complicated further by examples such as Þorleikr Hóskuldsson and Hrafnkell Freysgoði, whose introductions show, respectively, a hesitation to associate such a negative quality with the central family of the saga, and the confusion that arises in the audience when our expectations for the *ójafnaðarmaðr* are not met. As fate, prophecy, the opinions of others and the self-consciousness of the person accused of *ójafnaðr* come to feature in a narrative the depth of characterisation necessarily increases. This complicates our identification of 'villains' and 'heroes' in the portrayal of high-status main characters and the audience more frequently than not finds itself in disagreement with the guidance proffered by character introductions.

#### *6.i: Collective perspective: characterisation through interaction with the world*

Woloch's ideas on the relationship between the protagonist and the world in which they appear can be developed in order to give us further insight into characterisation in the *Íslendingasögur*. He describes a continuum between the individual and their surroundings, but his sources lack the sagas' use of introductory descriptions and focus more on a clear protagonist; I nevertheless found his thinking a useful way of approaching the diverse conclusions to emerge from this thesis. In Sophocles' play *Oedipus Rex*, and in the traditions that informed it, Oedipus becomes king of Thebes by solving the riddle of the Sphinx: what walks on four legs in the morning, on two legs at noon and three legs in the evening? Oedipus successfully answers that this creature represents the stages of man's life: first as a crawling child, then an adult walking on two legs and finally the elderly person supporting themselves with a cane. Woloch draws parallels between these stages and the relationship between a main character and the minor characters that they encounter during the course of a narrative. He distinguishes between the character and their setting: the world can only exist in the form that Oedipus sees it within his own consciousness; yet before he is born and when he dies the world around him continues to exist independently of him.<sup>694</sup>

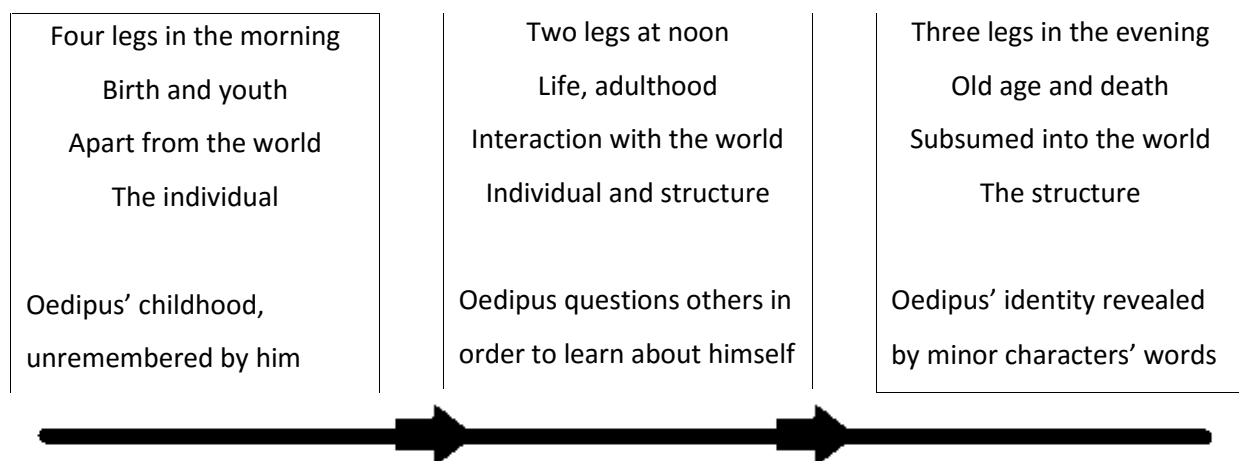
Woloch builds upon this idea to attach an interpretational filter to the Sphinx's riddle that explains different elements of the characterisation of the protagonist. On two feet, Oedipus, like all people, engages with the world around him, and in doing so he learns more about himself (the implication being that the audience learns about him at the same time). Woloch cites *Ulysses* to help

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<sup>694</sup> Woloch, *The One vs. The Many*, p. 324 and his Afterword, *passim*.



to explain this part of the parallel between the riddle and the play's characterisation of Oedipus: '[e]very life is many days, day after day. We walk through ourselves, meeting robbers, ghosts, old men, young men, wives, widows, brothers-in-love, but always meeting ourselves.'<sup>695</sup> The king must consult messengers, prophets and shepherds in order to come to the truth of his identity; this requires both time and patience on his part and ultimately leads him to a point where his understanding of himself becomes utterly reliant upon the minor characters who emerge from the world around him.<sup>696</sup> This reliance on others builds to a climax in the plot, and here Oedipus' character may be compared with the position of the old man of the riddle, who is about to be subsumed by the world that sustained him, just as Oedipus' idea of his own identity gives way to the truth revealed by the other characters. At the same time, the truth that they reveal about his origins is as beyond Oedipus' control as the world that lies before the baby in the riddle. Figure 3 presents my visual interpretation of the filter of characterisation that Woloch applies to the riddle. Comparable to his life cycle, the three phases of the character's relationship with the world can be viewed as a continuum.



**Figure 2:** Qualities of self-consciousness and characterisation in Oedipus, as they connect to the Sphinx's riddle in Woloch's analysis.

Recalling that Woloch's aim, like that of this thesis, is to demonstrate the connection between character and structure (predominantly in novels rather than ancient plays), I have associated each of these three phases with either the identification of the individual or with the structural framework in which the individual is found. This demonstrates the fact that there is not really a binary distinction between flat functional characters and fully rounded, human characters; the individualistic and the functional can overlap. Because of Woloch's focus on sources that feature

<sup>695</sup> Joyce, *Ulysses*, p. 175, as quoted by Woloch, *The One vs. The Many*, p. 323.

<sup>696</sup> Woloch, *The One vs. The Many*, pp. 327–31.

an identifiable protagonist, the interaction of structure and character leads him to demonstrate how the identity and personality of the protagonist is created by placing them at the centre of a world filled with minor characters. The protagonist's character and the narrative itself is structured by the interactions between the major character and the minor characters.

In order for this continuum between the individual and the structural aspects of character to be applied to the *Íslendingasögur* some alterations will inevitably have to be made. The use of character introductions is a particularly striking aspect of the sagas' characterisation, and as Part I demonstrated it is a narrative tool in itself that provides both a structural marker and a snapshot of the individual. The conventional language and details—and the expectations raised in an audience—mark the introduction of an *ójafnaðarmaðr* as part of the traditional setting and structure of the sagas; yet what is a character introduction but a perfectly contained description of the individual, set apart from the wider structure? These different aspects to character introductions mean that they can be placed at opposite ends of the scale in Figure 3: in a sense they are wholly about the individual, but they are also thoroughly rooted in the setting of the sagas. For this reason, Figure 4 visualises aspects of characterisation inspired by Woloch as a cyclical continuum rather than a line with opposing ends.

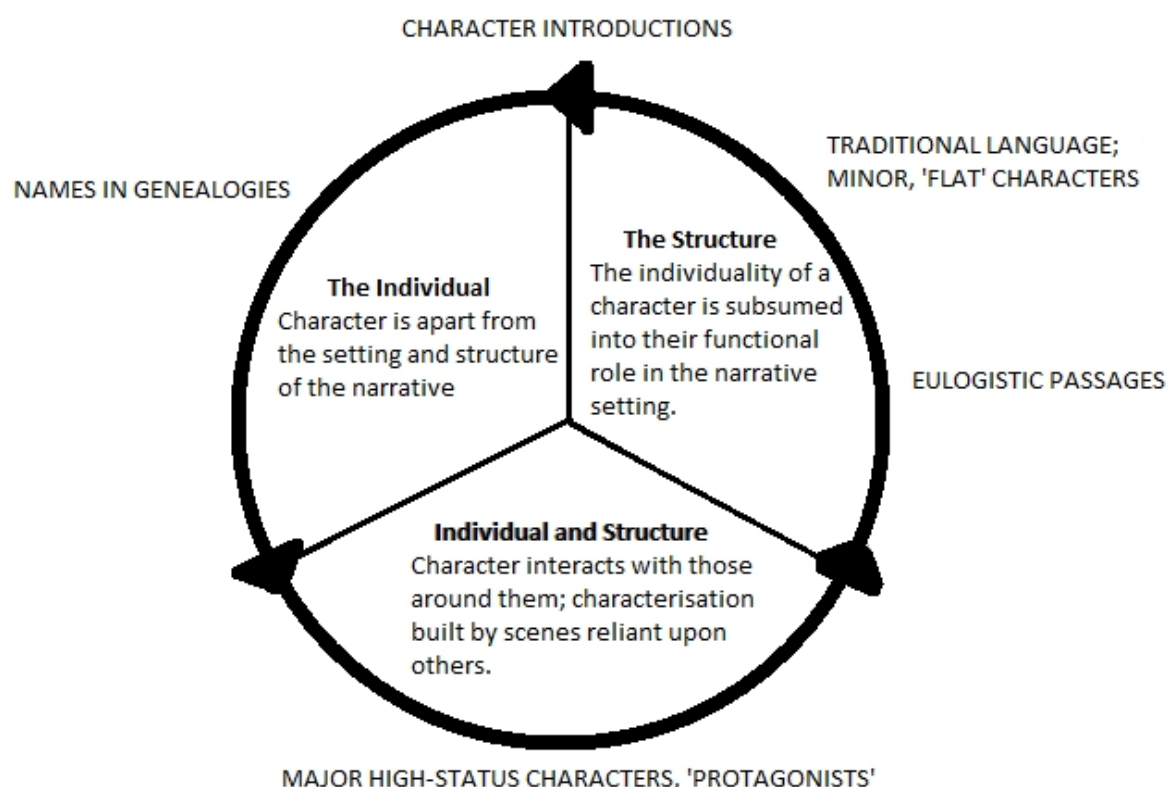


Figure 3: Aspects of characterisation in the *Íslendingasögur*.

Working through the methods of characterisation given in Figure 3, I shall briefly expand upon their placement, recalling arguments made earlier in this thesis. Woloch's approach simply forms a framework for my own conclusions, which I will present below in terms relevant to the sagas, not to the format of plays or realist novels. First, I discussed the use of names in genealogies in Chapter 2; later observing how they counterbalance the introductions of siblings, increase the standing of a family or provide a way to relate to the events of the narrative for audience members who consider themselves to be descended from those who do not play an active role in the sagas.<sup>691</sup> Yet as characters in their own right these named individuals remain apart from the setting: the ancestors of Egill Kolsson do not participate in the narrative of *Njáls saga* and contribute little to the introduction of the Egilssynir beyond implying a lineage that makes them seem slightly more impressive adversaries for Gunnarr to face.<sup>692</sup> They may thus only barely be termed 'individuals' for a modern audience who knows little or nothing of their lives; although in some cases they may have brought to mind different associations for a medieval audience.

The lack of first person narrators in the *Íslendingasögur* means that other examples in which we might say that an individual (or their concept of themselves) is set totally apart from the narrative are difficult to identify. Speech that is demonstrative of self-knowledge but remains distinct from the setting in which we find the characters is rare; when Hrafnkell declares that it is *hégomi* to believe in the gods it is explicitly rooted in the events that we have just witnessed; when Guðrún rejects the association with *ofsi* it is only because her father first links it to the course of action she wishes to take.

The personalities of protagonists are far more commonly portrayed through their interactions with other characters, as well as other narrative elements of the sagas (such as dreams, prophecies and the use of public opinion). This creates major characters whose personalities are built up through what I term 'collective perspective': as well as his introduction, we gain an overview of Hrafnkell's nature through his behaviour in encounters with Einarr, Þorbjörn, Sámr and his dependents. We are told what the public think of him and we must ultimately come to our own decision as to whether his more admirable traits balance out his worse side. In Chapter 4 I observed that high-status characters benefit from the depth that this collective perspective gives their personalities in a way that low-status, minor characters generally do not.<sup>693</sup> I suggested that this was because the stories that structure the sagas are more firmly dictated by the life, death and deeds of these high-status characters; it is noteworthy, then, that the nature of collective characterisation is

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<sup>691</sup> 2.ii.b.

<sup>692</sup> 2.ii.b, p. 51.

<sup>693</sup> 4.i.a, p. 125.

often contradictory. Thus *Laxdæla saga*'s obfuscation when it comes to Þorleikr Hǫskuldsson's *ójafnaðr*; the question of Hrafnkell's changed personality; and that of Grettir's motivations.

Due to collective perspective, sometimes we cannot be sure whose voice carries the most weight in a saga; it may be the narrator, or the character themselves, or their friends or enemies, or the values of the society depicted. In this sense, we cannot go 'beyond the evidence' any more than in actual human interactions;<sup>694</sup> is this not what leads us to refer to the inscrutability or apparent objectivity of the sagas?<sup>695</sup> It is so intrinsic to the genre that the role played by collective perspective is undoubtedly informed by the sagas' origins in oral tradition and public performance.

Whatever role we think an individual had in compiling the sagas into their current forms,<sup>696</sup> the way in which collective opinions of saga characters contribute to build up a sense of personality is striking evidence for their genesis in the public sphere. In a forthcoming review of Miller's latest monograph, Ranković notes the contradictory representations of Gunnarr af Hlíðarendi (in both *Njáls saga* and Miller's writing).<sup>697</sup> My own discussion of Gunnarr emphasises his associations with the quality *ójafnaðr*, despite the fact that he remains one of the most memorably heroic figures in the *Íslendingasögur*.<sup>698</sup> The different aspects of his personality emerge in his dealings with different groups of people in the saga, as with Grettir in his saga and Hrafnkell in his. Like Ranković, I ascribe this to the 'possibility that at least some of their complexity could have arisen from the author's having to contend with competing oral accounts'.<sup>699</sup>

This is not to argue that the individual scenes of interaction between a character like Gunnarr or Grettir and minor characters are representative of interactions preserved perfectly by oral traditions. As Woloch points out regarding the interactions in *Oedipus Rex*, '[t]hroughout the play, Oedipus has to rely on information—evidence, messages, and speech—made by and derived through other people. Each such event is, implicitly, an "accusation" [...] against the model of self-consciousness that forms the core of Oedipus's identity.'<sup>700</sup> Interactions between characters and also between irrational elements that drive the plot often contradict or confound our views regarding a major character: is Þorleikr the root narrative cause of Bolli's situation and thus Kjartan's death, or is Kjartan simply fated to die? Is Hrafnkell a tyrant who refuses to pay compensation and wants to

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<sup>694</sup> Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, pp. 69–70.

<sup>695</sup> Ironically, the narrative 'objectivity' encourages far more subjectivity in the audience's response.

<sup>696</sup> See Clover, 'The Long Prose Form'.

<sup>697</sup> Miller, 'Why is your Axe Bloody?'; Ranković, 'Review of "Why is your Axe Bloody?"', p. 360.

<sup>698</sup> 3.ii.d, p. 113.

<sup>699</sup> Ranković, 'Review of "Why is your Axe Bloody?"', p. 361.

<sup>700</sup> Woloch, *The One vs. The Many*, p. 331.

crush a bereaved father's independence or is he a remorseful man who wants to make amends with Þorbjörn? These contradictory viewpoints and the questions that they raise display the different reactions that audiences and storytellers have had to these characters and their actions throughout the period in which the sagas took form.<sup>701</sup>

Below (6.i.a) I give more detail about how I see the case-studies of Part II interacting within the concept of collective perspective, but here it remains to be said how eulogistic passages and character introductions function in Figure 4. *Ójafnaðarmenn* do not merit eulogies, however Arnkell Þórólfsson's and Víga-Glúmr's have been mentioned in passing above.<sup>702</sup> Both examples can be shown to elide the more complex aspects of their characters' lives.<sup>703</sup> In this sense the characters are subsumed into the narrative setting at the end of their lives: the complexity and contradictions that are built up through their interactions with others during their lifetime are forgotten when responsibility for their characterisation is reclaimed by the narrator.

That the narrator's voice is representative of the setting and the functional elements of the saga is emphasised by the stark, traditional language used in eulogies and introductions.<sup>704</sup> Throughout Chapters 2 and 3 the examples of *ójafnaðarmenn* (predominantly minor characters) that I examined demonstrate that the details in introductions and their positioning in the narrative work together to allow us to anticipate what will happen in a saga. From the number and nature of relations provided in an introduction, to the fact that an *ójafnaðarmaðr* appears late in a narrative as matters grow difficult for the hero, we read the sagas in a particular manner because of the conservative nature of narrative tools like character introductions. We do not expect characters like Þórðr hrossamaðr to emerge from the expected setting of the *ójafnaðarmaðr*: he is a lowly horse-herd with an inflated sense of his own importance.<sup>705</sup> Rather than acquiring a collective perspective

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<sup>701</sup> Cf. Woloch, *The One vs. The Many*, p. 373, n. 7: the interactions and details that Sophocles is said to have invented work precisely to enhance the drama and show where Oedipus' idea of himself is at odds with others' knowledge of him. Given that the play's original and modern audiences already knew the outcome, these inventions may be said to act as outlets for the audience's anxious foreknowledge. In addition it may seem a 'chicken and egg' question of who influenced whom (do audiences only have differing opinions because the saga gives us scope to, through these interactions?) but this is an entirely apposite, unresolvable problem for a genre of literature that came out of the oral-literate continuum of the twelfth, thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (see Quinn, 'Introduction', pp. 15–6).

<sup>702</sup> 3.i.b, p. 77; 3.ii.d, p. 108, n. 407.

<sup>703</sup> Andersson, *Growth of the Medieval Icelandic Sagas*, pp. 64–5.

<sup>704</sup> See also O'Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, p. 27: 'the information assumes a sort of public status [...] an uncontroversial consensus.'

<sup>705</sup> 3.iii, p. 117.

on Þórðr's character, his interactions with Þorsteinn reveal more about Þorsteinn, a main character in the *páttr*.<sup>706</sup>

6.i.a: '*Engi maðr skapr sik sjálf*':<sup>707</sup> *difficult protagonists and collective perspective*

Throughout Chapter 5 it was shown how many aspects of Hrafnkell's personality and *Hrafnkels saga*'s narrative are self-contradictory. Although his initial introduction alludes only to his promise, his second description instantly complicates matters by relating his personality to his interactions with others. The inconsistency of his treatment of the men of Hrafnkelsdalur and of Jökulsdalur makes it difficult to know how the narrator judges Hrafnkell, let alone how we as an audience should judge him.

The setting of *Hrafnkels saga* is sparsely populated by named individuals. There are none of the other chieftains or well-connected background characters we would recognise from many other sagas, especially those with a focus on events at the Alþingi. The saga therefore concentrates upon the interactions between its named characters (and a couple of unnamed women), with the attitudes of the general public providing a backdrop. For the most part it is Sámur who builds connections with the other named characters; in contrast Hrafnkell is mostly shown to be assertive in his interactions with others (Einarr, Þorbjörn, Sámur), maintaining the stance of their *yfirmaðr* ('superior'), as he is termed in his introductory description. Yet whilst Sámur is not unpopular as a chieftain, it is more often Hrafnkell who we see through the public eye.

Sámur's position and popularity with Hrafnkell's old *þingmenn* is down to the fact that he follows the advice of the Þjóstarssynir. Hrafnkell, on the other hand, regains the respect of the public seemingly through his narrative isolation, his suffering and his subsequent independent determination to make the most of his new land.<sup>708</sup> In a sense, Hrafnkell maintains a degree of independence from the saga setting, or the world around him, whilst Sámur is generally not shown

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<sup>706</sup> Cf. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, p. 71: 'Miss Bates is bound by a hundred threads to Highbury. We cannot tear her away without bringing her mother too, and Jane Fairfax and Frank Churchill, and the whole of Box Hill'.

<sup>707</sup> 'No man is formed by himself alone'; see below, n. 719.

<sup>708</sup> Throughout this paragraph and the one below it, my ideas are particularly indebted to conversations with Marion Poilvez and Sixt Wetzler, as well as other participants in the workshop 'Bad Guys and Wicked Girls in Old Norse Literature' held at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität, München, 5–6 December 2015.

acting independently from the advice and demands of others.<sup>709</sup> If he can be said to do so in offering Hrafnkell life then it simply reinforces the idea that Sámur does not function well independently — in contrast to Hrafnkell. The saga ends by showing Sámur bereft of the connections he relied on previously, unable to compete with Hrafnkell.

By the end of the saga Hrafnkell recognises the value of public opinion more than he did at the start. In his interaction with the *griðkona* he expresses displeasure at her words, but he nevertheless follows the course of action that she implies he should take. As a manifestation of the fact that public opinion will support him in this as it did not in the case of Einarr's death, the scene shows that Hrafnkell's attitude towards this sort of interaction has changed, even if his personality has not necessarily done so. Perhaps in this, and in Hrafnkell's advocacy for self-control (*ofsar þér eigi*), we come close to seeing the sagas' version of an individual who remains largely separate from their setting. Apart from the mildest hints through his conversation with Sámur and with the *griðkona* that his attitude towards others (his sons; public opinion) has altered, we do not know that he himself is changed by these encounters: public opinion and the audience's opinion of him may be changed, but this does not affect the individual character of Hrafnkell as it lies beyond the grasp of the narrative setting we are given. In a sense, the narrative setting changes itself in response to Hrafnkell's new circumstances more than we can assert that he is changed by the events.

A similar observation might be made regarding the narrative setting of *Grettis saga*. The society in Norway differs from the one in Iceland, and once he becomes a full outlaw in Iceland the setting changes yet again. However, Grettir is more deeply affected as a character by his interactions with others than Hrafnkell can be said to be. There is an ongoing negotiation of Grettir's character in the first part of the saga; he is *ódæll* in youth, but his father contributes to his personality; he is associated with *ofsi* for a time, but rejects the suggestion of his *ofsamaðr* uncle, Jökull Bárðarson, that he fight men rather than *óvættir*; Barði Guðmundarson repeatedly sees *ójafnaðr* in him, and this description is one that Grettir finds troubling.<sup>710</sup> For some he is a *tröll*, for others a murderer; it seems that only in outlawry can Grettir, the public and the saga audience come closer to a consensus on his actions.

As noted at 4.ii, Grettir's interactions during his outlawry tend to be more clear-cut: he is a deserved victor over Gísli Þorsteinsson, and maintains the respect of good people like Skapti

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<sup>709</sup> There is a curious irony in the fact that so many of his supporters are *einhleypingar* ('unattached men') (ÍF 11, 109; 111). Moreover, if Sámur's one independent act may be said to be allowing Hrafnkell to live, then an early interaction that perhaps *does* affect Hrafnkell is the killing of Einarr, which ends as disastrously for him as Sámur's decision to let Hrafnkell live ended for Sámur.

<sup>710</sup> 4.ii, p. 133.

Póroddsson, Snorri goði and Þorbjörg digra.<sup>711</sup> The contrast in opinions that remains a part of Grettir's outlawry aligns better with our ideas of who is 'good' and should support the hero, and who is 'bad' and threatens his life. In his early years, opinion on Grettir is far more mixed and we are subtly forced to evaluate our opinions of all those who have had a say: do we believe the narrator when we are told that Grettir's *ódæll* is confined to his youth? How does his father's portrayal affect our opinion of this unruly teenager? Is he changed by his time in Norway and would we agree with the widespread analysis of his *ofsi*, or do we think that Barði's opinion deserves more weight? As these different voices pull us in different directions the constant remains Grettir, whose portrayal becomes something complex, sophisticated and no longer wholly explicable in terms of a short summary of introduction.

When Grettir shares a moment with his half-brother Þorsteinn drómundr he tells him '[s]att er þat, sem mælt er, at engi maðr skapr sik sjálfr'.<sup>712</sup> This is truer of Grettir than many characters, not just for whatever influence we think his father might have had upon his psychology, but because throughout his saga he encounters so many well-known figures from the *Íslendingasögur* and each encounter helps us to shape our interpretation of his character. Our idea as an audience of who Grettir is comes from the way in which he interacts with others and the extent to which we judge both his and their words to be reliable.

That characterisation in the sagas often relies on paranormal or irrational elements to supplement human interactions is shown especially by *Laxdæla saga*. In Chapter 4 I observed the negative reactions that readers had had towards Óláfr pái despite the positive view the saga itself otherwise has of him.<sup>713</sup> The problem seems to emerge from the disjunction between how we view his prescience now (i.e. that it is only valuable if he acts on it) and how it would be viewed by a medieval audience (he is wise for his foresight but cannot change Kjartan's fate or the established outcome of the story). The irrational elements in *Laxdæla saga* often require interactions between characters: Guðrún and Gestr, for instance. It could be argued that in this example we learn as much about Guðrún from the way this teenage girl speaks to a wise seer and the respect that he shows her in turn, as we learn about her from the dreams themselves.

In the end, *Laxdæla saga* asks us to continually re-evaluate Guðrún through the interactions she has had with Kjartan, Bolli and others in the saga. The question of who she loved best (and hurt most) requires audiences, amongst other things, to examine and defend their interpretations of what exactly the worst type of hurt is in the saga (is it emotional, as when Kjartan discovers she has

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<sup>711</sup> 4.ii, pp. 138–40.

<sup>712</sup> ÍF 7, 137: 'it's true what people say, that no man is formed by himself alone'.

<sup>713</sup> 4.i.b, pp. 127–9.



married Bolli, or physical, as when Kjartan and Bolli are killed?). That there remains no simple answer to the question posed by the saga demonstrates that even now, in every conversation (scholarly or otherwise) that touches on Guðrún Ósvífrsdóttir, we are still in the process of defining her personality and character, as well as those of Kjartan and Bolli.

#### *6.i.b: Minor Character Syndrome: the importance of narrative triggers*

When Guðrún gives in to her father's wishes and agrees to marry Bolli she rejects Ósvífr's suggestion that she behaves with *ofsi*. Like the 'accusatory' nature of the encounters in *Oedipus Rex*, the scenes of interaction examined by this thesis concentrate on moments where other characters (or the narrator themselves) label someone with an undesirable term. *Ójafnaðr* and similar qualities are not the attributes with which people want to be associated. For that reason they have a powerful effect, whether it is to coerce Guðrún into changing her mind, to instil doubt in Grettir about his behaviour or to allow public opinion to turn on Hrafnkell.

Just as an accusation that someone is behaving with *ójafnaðr* can provoke a reaction, so it is clear that a character who is described unequivocally as an *ójafnaðarmaðr* provokes those around him to respond. The narrative triggers work on a structural level to provide an interaction, or series of interactions, through which a hero can be revealed (3.ii.b) — or killed (3.ii.d) — or in which the themes and concerns of the story that follows are alluded to (3.ii.c). By inserting a reference to a quality that carries such a social stigma with it, the sagas reveal a great deal about the morals and attitudes of the other characters: Guðmundr ríki is tainted from the outset in *Ljósvetninga saga* by his willingness to support someone like Sǫxólfr; Gunnar af Hlíðarendi loses some of his shine when he anticipates being brought down to the level of the Egilssynir and Starkaðarsynir in their horse-fight; Snorri goði's ambition and ambiguity are partially defined by his association with men like Styrr and Þórólfr. On the other hand, Gunnarr Keldugnúpsfífl, Króka-Refr and Bárðr Snæfellsáss demonstrate their impeccable heroic pedigrees by brooking no trouble from the *ójafnaðarmenn* in their sagas.

The introduction of an *ójafnaðarmaðr* to a saga is a moment at which a very controlled type of chaos is allowed to reign. Unlike Hrappr in *Njáls saga*, who has no introduction and simply rampages into the lives of the Njálssynir, we have a clear idea of what to expect from an *ójafnaðarmaðr*. The consistency of the examples I have looked at — and the consistency of the *engi jafnaðarmaðr* exceptions noted in Chapter 4 — means that our narrative expectations are strong when it comes to the *ójafnaðarmaðr*. Yet these characters are not quite interchangeable: when I talk

above about these minor characters becoming subsumed into the setting of the saga as their personality is not affected by their interactions with others and their introductions seem formulaic, I refer to the setting of each individual saga. The world in which these characters exist is simultaneously unique to the saga in which they appear and yet also informed by the setting of *Íslendingasögur* in general.

The aim of this thesis has been to highlight the intrinsic importance of character and characterisation to the structure of the *Íslendingasögur*. Evidently, purely functional or typological categories such as those used by Lönnroth were inadequate to describe the nature of character in the genre.<sup>714</sup> Functional categories position characters as building blocks, isolated from the other components of the narrative; as though individuals described in similar terms were simply interchangeable. In Part I, I looked at many minor characters described as *ójafnaðarmenn* by the saga narrators, but the broader conventions of introducing each one and their positioning in the wider narrative demonstrated the importance of additional factors to characterisation. Functionally, being an *ójafnaðarmaðr* makes a character a narrative trigger: they will undoubtedly be involved in actions that bring about a shift in the society and story. The specific nature of these actions is only defined through information we are given — or information conspicuously lacking — about their family, situation, additional traits or known habits.

Generally, therefore, we recognise these characters as a prelude to trouble, and then to the meatier material of the plot: the consequences. The Egilssynir in *Njáls saga* are not fleshed out in depth, so it is hard to refute Miller's description of them as mere 'jerks' — and Þjóstólfr, Miller's preferred '*ójafnaðarmaðr*' is a far more interesting psychological case, even if the saga uses no such word to describe him.<sup>715</sup> But the Egilssynir are jerks described as *ójafnaðarmenn* who do precisely the work of *ójafnaðarmenn* in the sagas, and they are jerks who behave in a manner very particular to the moment the saga chooses to use them. Þjóstólfr may indeed be said to perform the role of a plot trigger when he brings Hallgerðr's marriage to Glúmr to an end (against Hallgerðr's wishes).<sup>716</sup> However, I do not claim that only *ójafnaðarmenn* are narrative triggers; rather that only *ójafnaðarmenn* are *ójafnaðarmenn*; and all *ójafnaðarmenn* are narrative triggers. Þjóstólfr at least ostensibly seems to think he is protecting Hallgerðr, or acting in her interests; *ójafnaðarmenn* act only in their own interests — even if the consequences of their actions benefit the protagonists indirectly.

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<sup>714</sup> Lönnroth, *Critical Introduction*, p. 63; 1.ii, pp. 17–8.

<sup>715</sup> Miller, '*Why is your Axe Bloody?*', p. 288.

<sup>716</sup> ÍF 12, 48–50.

When Byock suggests that Kjartan in *Laxdæla saga* should be equated with the *ójafnaðarmaðr* as a character-type, as when Miller says that Þjóstólfr is one simply because he does not pay compensation for his killings, these scholars can be said to express an extreme response to the potential unreliability of the saga narrator.<sup>717</sup> We have seen how the audience's doubt in the narrator functions in responses to *Laxdæla saga*, *Grettis saga* and *Hrafnkels saga*, and particularly how it has affected discussions of the latter. Calling Kjartan and Þjóstólfr *ójafnaðarmenn* — and denying the function of this quality in the characterisation of Hrafnkell and the Egilssynir — ignores the role of the character introduction entirely.

As observed throughout this chapter, the introduction of minor characters often feels less like it describes an individual person and more like a necessary part of the narrative setting. The consistent nature of these characters means that their function as a plot tool subsumes their individuality. However, these introductions might still be said to describe an 'individual plot tool': the functional minor character is created from established, traditional descriptions of trouble-makers and disruptive people, but each one performs a particular, individual role in the saga in which it occurs. Yet their efficient functionality and the similar way in which *ójafnaðarmenn* are introduced appears to make them too much a part of the background setting; Miller and Byock look for more flamboyant, psychologically complex *ójafnaðarmenn*, whilst one of the only examples of such a character, Hrafnkell, has his *ójafnaðr* explained away.<sup>718</sup>

The temptation clearly exists, especially when it comes to those sagas favoured as the 'classical' sagas, to assume that we, the audience, know best when it comes to the characters, and to override textual evidence in favour of a lingering impression of humanity. For instance, Ármann Jakobsson (somewhat in jest) notes that Þráinn Sigfússon 'is a supporting character with a talent and firm ambition to become a main one'.<sup>719</sup> We are drawn in by the realism created by the collective perspective of characterisation in these texts, and perhaps the character introduction comes to be seen as overly-simplistic signposting. When we reject the description of a character provided by a saga and add our own idea of what they seem to be we are participating in the contradictory tradition of characterisation in the sagas. But for the purposes of understanding first what an *ójafnaðarmaðr* is, and also what the medieval perspectives on Þjóstólfr were likely to be, it is important to distinguish between modern reactions to the characters and the evidence of the sagas

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<sup>717</sup> Byock, *Feud*, p. 147.

<sup>718</sup> Heinemann, '*Skömm er óhófs ævi*'.

<sup>719</sup> Ármann Jakobsson, 'The Impetuousness of Þráinn Sigfússon', p. 192; cf. Forster, *Aspects of the Novel*, p. 72; O'Donoghue, *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature*, pp. 24; 29.

themselves. This means working with the sagas' own contradictions and descriptions rather than picking and choosing how Old Icelandic terms should be used according to our personal preferences.

In this, an over-emphasis of form and individuality is as unhelpful as Lönnroth's over-emphasis on function and category. Character in the sagas is a blend of both: even a 'flat', minor character can only be defined as such against their opposite — and vice versa. Whilst 'flat' and 'round' are not particularly nuanced, these terms imply what a closer analysis of characterisation shows: we can observe the round characters from multiple angles and perspectives.<sup>720</sup> However, we can only understand the perspectives we are given through the context of the conservative, referential vocabulary used by the sagas to describe setting and character. The interactions between major and minor characters; between the voice of the narrator and the voices of saga characters; between fate and deed; and between nature and nurture; all contribute to our understanding of character and structure in the *Íslendingasögur*.

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<sup>720</sup> Galef, *Supporting Cast*, pp. 21–2.

## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ANF	<i>Arkiv för nordisk filologi.</i>
Cleasby-Vigfusson	<i>Icelandic-English Dictionary</i> , R. Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson.
ÍF	Íslensk fornrit.
ÍF 1	<i>Íslendingabók; Landnámabók</i> , ed. Jakob Benediktsson.
ÍF 2	<i>Egils saga</i> , ed. Sigurður Nordal.
ÍF 3	<i>Borgfirðingasögur: Hænsa-Póris saga; Bjarnar saga; Heiðarvíga saga</i> , ed. Sigurður Nordal and Guðni Jónsson.
ÍF 4	<i>Eyrbyggja saga</i> , ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson and Matthías Þórðarson.
ÍF 5	<i>Laxdæla saga</i> , ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson.
ÍF 6	<i>Vestfirðingasögur: Gísla saga; Fóstbræðra saga; Hávarðar saga Ísfirðings</i> , ed. Björn K. Þórólfsson and Guðni Jónsson.
ÍF 7	<i>Grettis saga; Bandamanna saga</i> , ed. Guðni Jónsson.
ÍF 8	<i>Vatnsdæla saga</i> , ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson.
ÍF 9	<i>Eyfirðingasögur: Víga-Glúms saga</i> , ed. Jónas Kristjánsson.
ÍF 10	<i>Ljósvetninga saga; Reykdæla saga ok Víga-Skútu</i> , ed. Björn Sigfússon.
ÍF 11	<i>Austfirðingasögur: Þorsteins þáttr stangarhöggs; Hrafnkels saga Freysgoða; Brandkrossa þáttr; Fljótsdæla saga</i> , ed. Jón Jóhannesson.
ÍF 12	<i>Brennu-Njáls saga</i> , ed. Einar Ól. Sveinsson.
ÍF 13	<i>Harðar saga; Bárðar saga</i> , ed. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson.
ÍF 14	<i>Kjalnesinga saga; Króka-Refs saga; Þórðar saga hreðu; Finnboga saga; Gunnars saga Keldugnúpsfjfls</i> , ed. Jóhannes Halldórsson.
ÍF 15 <sup>2</sup>	<i>Biskupasögur; Kristni saga</i> , ed. Sigurgeir Steingrímsson, Ólafur Halldórsson <i>et al.</i>
ÍF E1	<i>Eddukvæði I: Rigspúla</i> , ed. Jónas Kristjánsson and Vésteinn Ólason.
JEGP	<i>Journal of English and Germanic Philology.</i>
KLNM	<i>Kulturhistorisk leksikon for nordisk middelalder.</i>
ONP	<i>Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog.</i>
SS	<i>Sturlunga Saga</i> , ed. Jón Jóhannesson <i>et al.</i>
TCNE	Medieval Texts and Cultures of Northern Europe.
VMS	<i>Viking and Medieval Scandinavia.</i>
VSNR	Viking Society for Northern Research.

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